

Melville's Mirror

Narrating Critical Thinking in Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and "Benito Cereno"

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A Thesis Presented to the Department of Literature,
Area Studies, and European Languages
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the M.A.
Degree

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UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

December 2013

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2013

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<http://www.duo.uio.no/>

Trykk: Reprosentralen, Universitetet i Oslo

Acknowledgements

First of all, my sincerest thanks to Professor Nils Axel Nissen for agreeing to supervise me. Seldom have I received such swift and accurate feedback. Thank you to my family and friends for their support and motivation. I would also like to give thanks to my fellow students of the eight floor of Niels Treschow for thought inducing coffee breaks and leisurely strolls around Blindern campus.

Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	‘Reality and Dead Wall Reveries’: Narrative Layers in “Bartleby, the Scrivener”	11
3	‘One Dull Round of Command’: Racist Idealism in “Benito Cereno”	29
4	Conclusion.....	53
	Works Cited.....	58

No table of figures entries found.

1 Introduction

*I muse upon my country's ills—
The tempest bursting from the waste of
Time*

*On the world's fairest hope linked with
man's foulest crime.*

(Herman Melville, "Misgivings")

After a period of revolution in France in 1830, Alexis de Tocqueville and his companion Gustave de Beaumont travelled to the United States to study the American penitentiary system. Upon arrival, however, Tocqueville and his companion would quickly come to change focus. With his two volume book *Democracy in America*, published in 1835 and 1840, Tocqueville became one of the first modern thinkers to consider democracy as an important subject in its own right. In the study, he describes the multifaceted democratic landscape of this new nation, pointing out instances that in a positive sense set the United States apart from other nations. However, *Democracy in America* also highlights the ambivalent nature of American democracy, with problematic areas such as slavery, capitalism, and freedom of thought.

‘[N]othing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of conditions. I readily discovered the prodigious influence which this primary fact exercises on the whole course of society’ (Tocqueville 23). Tocqueville notes how Americans almost always manage to work together towards a common goal, putting aside their ego (642). ‘Everything is extraordinary in America, the social conditions of the inhabitants, as well as the laws’ (347). He saw the country’s booming economy as a natural enemy of all violent passions and hoped that industrialization and capitalism would gradually loosen the barriers that kept classes from each other (619). Tocqueville’s optimism still resonates with American writers such as Cornel West, who claims that the modern democracy may not have originated in America, ‘and we have no monopoly on its promise. But it is here where the seeds of democracy have taken the deepest root and sprouted most robustly’ (68).

Democracy is associated with economic growth, popular sovereignty and technology. Paradoxically, the same characteristics can be seen to hinder democratic development (Touraine 1). In a letter to Ernest de Chabol dated June 9, 1831, Tocqueville points out that Americans ‘have sought the value of everything in this world only in the answer to this single question: How much money will it bring in?’ (qtd. in Schleifer 72). Tocqueville did not dislike capitalism per se, and he was hopeful that religion and the love of liberty protected Americans from moral corruption (668). However, he did express scepticism towards America’s obsession with monetary value: ‘the prosperity of the United States is the source of the most serious dangers that threaten them, since it tends to create [...] that over-excitement which accompanies a rapid increase of fortune; and to awaken in others those feelings of envy, mistrust, and regret’ (480). Americans should not rejoice over this new tendency, but be alarmed (480).

The Declaration of Independence states that ‘all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.’ Tocqueville’s personal experience provided him with a different perception of the equality of conditions. Even though international slave trade was outlawed in 1808, one third of the American population still worked as slaves between 1790-1860 (Temin 53). Tocqueville condemned slavery and found it a stark contrast to the nation’s democratic ideals; not only because of the treatment of the slave, but also due to the corrosive effect it had on the master (432). In 1820, the free black man David Walker wrote an *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, which said, ‘See your Declaration Americans!! Do you understand your own language? Hear your language, proclaimed to the world, July 4th, 1776—“We hold these truths to be self evident—that ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL”’ (qtd. in West 47-48).

Democracy meant that all ‘Men will be perfectly free, because they will all be entirely equal; and they will all be perfectly equal, because they will be entirely free’ (Tocqueville 614). Tocqueville hoped that Americans would aspire for greater things than their current state. But as slavery ended in the British West Indies in 1833 and on the Dutch and French islands in 1848, leaving ‘the United States more and more an anomaly’ (Sundquist 180), he grew sceptical as to whether or not they would succeed. One of the main causes for concern was the nation’s lack of freedom of expression and self-criticism. Tocqueville insisted that in America the critical voice ‘yields at length, oppressed by the daily efforts he has been making, and he subsides into silence, as if he was tormented by remorse for having spoken the

truth' (317). For this reason, he claimed that no great writers were to be found in America, 'there can be no literary genius without freedom of opinion, and freedom of opinion does not exist in America' (318).

Now, Herman Melville would most likely disagree with the last statement, and considering the impact writers like Hawthorne, Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau and Melville himself would come to have on the nineteenth century, Tocqueville's words seem somewhat an exaggeration. But Melville was well aware of what can be termed 'the moral hypocrisy of America.' At the time, the United States was divided in two between the idealists who saw America as 'the City on the Hill,' 'a New World specially released from all the limitations of the past' (Stern 433), and those who did not believe that America's problems would dissolve in the near future. Melville belonged to the latter group. Even though he was inspired by the American transcendentalist movement, which was arguably idealist in nature, he would gradually distance himself from such notions of Romanticism (Stern 434-436). His works increasingly showcased a bitterness and disappointment aimed at the nation's injustice.

Melville was well aware of the discrepancy between the nation's economic and religious doctrine and the lives of real Americans (Kuebrich 381) He lost his father at an early age, which threw the family into poverty. On June 1, 1851, while working on *Moby-Dick*, Melville would write a letter to Hawthorne, exclaiming that 'Dollars damn me; and the malicious Devil is forever grinning [...] I shall at last be worn out and perish, like an old nutmeg-grater [...] What I feel most moved to write, that is banned,—it will not pay' ("Letters to the Hawthornes" 234). However, the issue that most inflamed Melville was not economic concerns, but slavery. Slavery was like a 'litmus test for assessing the deep democratic tradition in America' (West 91), symptomatic of the discrepancy between laws of conscience and human conduct (Stein 105). How could a nation with such a recent history of revolution and despotism support systematic subjugation of its own people? Capitalism may have changed the traditional craftsman and apprentice structure, creating new sources for inequality (Kuebrich 385), but it was slavery that shrouded America's soul 'in a blackness, ten times black' (Melville, "Mosses" 218-219).

My thesis is that Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and "Benito Cereno" can be seen as two different but complimentary approaches to critical thinking; encouraging self-criticism on both a personal and a national level and meant to inspire democratic progress. I believe that Melville, in response to the contemporary democratic inadequacy, saw a need to

transform the reading public, make people more aware of their rights and their duties as American citizens. If the political and judicial system represented an outdated and inappropriate view, it would be up to the individual to take action. Melville's literature expresses a need for change; in attitudes, values and ideals. As Tocqueville pointed out, the most important criteria for a nation's success are the individual mores (Schleifer 52). A new direction in terms of moral responsibility at the micro-level could have more of an impact than a decision taken at the national level. The relationship between micro and macro is of course a dialectical one in which the pendulum swings both ways, but if the government is slow to correct the country's moral flaws, it may be up to the individual to take charge.

Before I move on to demonstrate *how* Melville encourages "critical thinking", a more thorough understanding of this key concept is needed. Critical thinking is inextricably connected to the modern understanding of democracy. In essays such as "The American Scholar," thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson asserted that democracy is not a static situation. Democracy involves movement, an independent and thoughtful consideration of established truths. In a static situation, no democratic progress is made. Man is 'the victim of society, he tends to become a mere thinker, or, still worse, the parrot of other men's thinking' (Emerson, "The American Scholar" 521). In a democracy, the subjects have to assert their rights. It is a battle against the dominant systems of logic (Touraine 12). It is more than a guarantee or a privilege, it is a responsibility. The Industrial Revolution brought technologies of 'mass production, consumption, and communication.' The danger was that liberty might become 'so alienated from instrumental reason that [one] may completely reject it' (Touraine 12).

John Dewey, American philosopher and psychologist, defined critical thinking, or 'reflective thinking' as he called it, as 'active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends' (qtd. in Fisher 2). It has to do with *how* the individual gathers information, but also how this insight is *used*. Edward Glaser presents a similar understanding of critical thinking; it is '[first] an attitude of being disposed to consider in a thoughtful way the problems and subjects that come within the range of one's experience [and secondly] knowledge of the methods of logical enquiry and reasoning.' He underlines that it is both an attitude and a choice of methods, which also requires some 'skill in applying those methods' (qtd. in Fisher 3). It is a technique to be enhanced or weakened by interaction and education.

Still, a number of questions remain unanswered. How can Melville's literature create a critical reader? Is the process of reading an adequate tool for making someone a critically

thinking individual? My claim is not that reading in itself is enough to *create* a critical individual. Critical thinking is a matter of degree and involves too many facets to be developed by reading alone: flexibility, seeking improvements, showing acceptance for the opinions of others, active engagement with the world, organizing thoughts, to name a few (Walsh and Paul qtd. in Moon 137). But I do believe that reading, particularly Melville's texts, can contribute to a more profound understanding of critical thinking. Melville's writing deals with the relativity of truth, communication, and refusing to accept immorality in a way that makes the reader play an active role. Fused with topics such as race, slavery, economy and inequality, Melville's writing encourages an active, self-reflective position to American democracy. He takes 'charge of the structures inherent in thinking [by] imposing intellectual standards upon them' (Fisher 5).

Presuming that critical thinking is not only an innate instinct (Manlove 11), but a teachable discipline, how can it be improved? What teaching method is most appropriate in the reading situation, and what does Melville choose? There are primarily two approaches to critical thinking: teaching directly or indirectly. Eugene B. Zechmeister and James E. Johnson opt for the prior method, which favours concrete strategies or methods (9). Zechmeister and Johnson's functional approach emphasizes principles and rules that can help in everyday affairs, such as causality, analyzing beliefs, decision making, argumentation and other skills. An indirect approach typically allows and demands that the learner take greater part in acquiring such expertise. In terms of prose, the reader is given more room to make his own hypothesis or conclusion. I have decided to look at "Benito Cereno" and "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street," which to me represent an indirect approach to encouraging critical thought. As Umberto Eco has suggested of literature in general, these short stories do 'not necessarily have an explicitly political content,' but they can still have a political impact (Eco xv). Like Socrates in Plato's "Meno," Melville presents a paradox which it is up to the reader to reflect upon.

When *White Jacket* was released, Melville wrote: 'What a madness and anguish it is, that an author can never—under no conceivable circumstances—be at all frank with his readers' (qtd. in Berthoff 40). This can be seen as a comment on a fundamental dilemma in literature. In order to exist, the text needs to be understood. But in order to be interesting, the text needs to remain incomplete and alluring (Rimmon-Kenan 122). The quote may also be a comment on the time period. One should not underestimate Melville's consideration of the politically unstable climate of the 1850s. The United States was on the brink of a civil war. As

an American, this would most likely have caused some self-censorship in terms of published writing. Thirdly, and more importantly, I believe Melville's preference for indirectness and ambiguity has to do with his resistance to contemporary normative and dogmatic views. If his stories were to preach critical thought in an indoctrinating way, it would not allow the reader any freedom of interpretation. It would be self-contradictory of Melville to criticize society for not stimulating critical thought, while at the same time deciding on behalf of the reader what he or she should think. Instead, Melville's writing poses a number of questions, but never fully answers them. In *Moby-Dick*, America's culture and its idealisation of whiteness is under scrutiny, but Melville does not present a solution to the problem. 'In this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a sacred white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself' (Melville, "Mosses" 220).

There are two possible downsides to Melville's writing style. First of all, there is a real chance that the average reader will not be able to pick up on Melville's intentions as a writer. Those who do not share Melville's democratic ideals might misinterpret the text. The text may be seen as representative of values which Melville himself rejected, thereby possibly reducing the meaning of his work. A passive uncritical reader may actually have his misconceptions strengthened by not registering the subtleties of the narrative.

Secondly, Melville tends to prefer skepticism to optimism, realism to idealism. During his lifetime, Melville's take on mankind grew increasingly pessimistic. What started out as a call for the individual to take charge was reduced to disbelief and emphasis on governmental interference (Stern 440). Melville became obsessed with the relativity of meaning and sceptical to the idea of society always moving forward. However, Melville's writing does not suggest how conflicts and dilemmas ought to be solved. Unlike Emerson, Melville actually disputes whether or not man is capable and willing to change. He not only doubts America's *return* to a fallen world East of Eden, but questions the very existence of such an ideal world. Melville's writing is self-contradictory; he encourages the reader to be critical and progressive in his actions, but seems apprehensive to insist that any real change is possible. He uses a deterministic realism to encourage individualism. I will return to this literary dilemma later.

My main focus will be on two of Melville's magazine pieces: "Benito Cereno" and "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street." I have decided to look at Melville's shorter narratives, because they represent a condensed version of Melville's craftsmanship as a writer. The magazine genre made Melville 'compress and focus his creative powers' (Bickley 131), which make the two selected stories appropriate for an in-depth contrastive study. In

addition, they seem the most expressive of Melville's focus on critical thinking, even more so than his novels. Both texts were published in *Putnam's Monthly*, which had an 'analytical, critical, politically liberal [...] audience' (Post-Lauria 177). Magazine pieces often had a much larger readership than novels. Even though magazines and newspapers were frowned upon as representing unserious outlets for literature, they allowed Melville to be rather honest with a multitude of readers (Post-Lauria 152).

As critical thinking may prove too wide a field to study in this format, I have narrowed it down to two character traits: the ability to be self-critical and the desire for truth and objectivity. I find these two to be the most relevant subject areas in terms of critical thinking, but also the most commonly represented in Melville's two stories. In "Bartleby, the Scrivener," Melville exposes the power and potential abuse of power in terms of narrating. He draws attention to how truth and reality are always connected to someone's opinion or ideology. The reader is meant to carefully consider the lawyer's words and actions. Being the narrator, he is in a position where he can easily, knowingly or not, take advantage of this power. With "Bartleby," Melville seems to be urging Americans to be critical of that which is represented as factual knowledge, underlining the ambiguous, grey nature of knowing. It is not only about that which is represented as realistic, but the individual's response to these so-called truths.

In "Benito Cereno," the narrator is relatively omniscient and makes comments about the nature of the main character, Captain Amasa Delano. Despite what the title might imply, Delano is the one whose vision largely dominates how the other characters are perceived. This combination of narrator and focaliser invites the reader to critically evaluate Delano's ideology and norms and how they can affect human perception. It is a criticism of the white Yankee captain, the racist idealism of an exploring American. Based on a true story, Melville's version focuses on the psychological processes that limit critical and logical thinking, an alternative to the original Captain Delano's story. Melville examines both the consequences and the root of racist idealism. Being a real historical incident, Melville questions the authority and legitimacy of the white American culture. What prevents the dominant culture from changing, and who is responsible for the current state of affairs?

When looking at Melville's narratives, there is a need for precise and systematic description. I will therefore be relying on the terminology presented by narrative theory. The other reason why I adhere to narrative theory is its methodological focus. 'Narrative theory

contends that narrative structures serve to constitute the text's meaning; it furthermore claims that these narrative structures can not only extend but also delimit the meaning which they themselves create' (Lothe 16). It is the result of a structuralist attempt to make explicit the underlying textual systems that create meaning (Jonathan Culler qtd. in Genette 8). It deals with questions such as 'What is literature?' and 'How is literature?' Narrative theory tends to situate itself somewhere between the more author-focused critics of the nineteenth century and reader-response theory. I agree with Gerard Genette that biographical details *might* help the reader understand a text, that there will often be a 'constraint on possible contents and styles implicit in his or her signature on the text' (Chatman 88). But the text itself should be the basis for literary analysis. Information about the author is more of a supplement than a guide to understand the meaning of a text (Genette 28).

Through his study of Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Genette defines 'narrative' as both that which is told and the act of telling (26-27). An important distinction is drawn between 'mood' and 'voice,' 'whose point of view orients the narrative perspective' and 'who is the narrator' (Genette 10), which roughly corresponds to the terms "focaliser" and "narrator." Focalisation has to do with who sees and observes. The narrator is a matter of who is telling the story and how it is being told. Both point of view and representation of fictional reality are closely connected to critical thinking and will be discussed interchangeably in the chapters to come.

There are, however, some issues with Genette's now canonical work of theory. Some of his terms and descriptions can seem disorganized and often unclear, especially in terms of focalisation. Genette, being one of the first to discuss these terms, was well aware that his definitions in time would need alteration and refinement (Genette 263). Analyzing Proust, while at the same time introducing a new concept, does not make his definitions any easier to grasp. I will therefore supplement *Narrative Discourse* with Mieke Bal's *Narratology*, Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse*, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction*, and Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. I am particularly fond of Rimmon-Kenan and Bal, as they give more of an easy-to-grasp textbook presentation of narratology. That being said, I will not be adhering to Bal's distinction between fabula and story. This is partly because I do not agree with her categorical separation of the two concepts, but mostly because I find it rhetorically awkward to restrict the word "story" from its common referent. Booth is interesting, since he introduced the concept of the "unreliable narrator," which will be

particularly relevant in the discussion of “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” Chatman gives a systematic presentation of the relationship between real reader, narrator and real author. I find it to be a more coherent way of looking at terms such as “implied reader” and “implied author,” than that which is found in Genette. Though I do not quite agree with Chatman’s division of actors in the narrating transaction proper, his work is important when looking at Melville’s narrative layers.

There is no denying that “Bartleby, the Scrivener” and “Benito Cereno” have received a substantial amount of critical attention. Ever since the Melville Renaissance of the 1920s, critics have tried to determine the meaning of these most elusive stories. Bartleby has been seen to represent a disillusioned worker (Murray), a psychological double to the narrator (Marcus 108), a reincarnation of Christ (Stein). Some have even tried to analyse this “Story of Wall Street” by looking at factual information, such as the historical context of New York (Foley) or biographical similarities with Melville himself (Bickley 26, Mumford 58). The writing on “Benito Cereno,” now considered an American classic, is no less overwhelming, ranging from interpretations focusing on debunking the pre-civil war mythology (Johnson 426) to the struggle to deconstruct the binary opposition between good and evil (Cardwell 99, and Miller, Jr. 7) and old world versus new world slavery (Sundquist).

To me, this is not a reason to avoid looking at these stories. If anything, the sheer variety of interpretations show that there is always a new way to look at Melville’s writing. I also find the theme of critical thinking as underdeveloped in Melville research, especially concerning his shorter narratives. Little contrastive work has been done on both “Bartleby, the Scrivener” and “Benito Cereno.” With the exception of Philippe Jaworski’s “Desert and Empire: From ‘Bartleby’ to ‘Benito Cereno,’” an article that deals with the theme of vision, there are few comparative analysis of the two texts. Even Jaworski’s article is far from exhaustive. It is rather brief and mostly focuses on “Benito Cereno.” In addition, it does not consider the untold narrative of Bartleby and the black slaves, which is important to do in relation to “vision.” Like much writing on Melville, Jaworski does not make a systematic analysis. His close reading remains little more than a sum of personal notifications, because it is unsystematic. To counter such an effect, I will be using narrative theory.

In this introduction, my primary objective has been to contextualise Melville’s emphasis on critical thinking and to define what such a term implies. Melville’s writing can be seen as a response to the lack of democratic development and self-reflection in 1850s

America. As Tocqueville points out, the United States struggled with issues of capitalism, slavery and the ability to take criticism. Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and "Benito Cereno" can be seen as an attempt to stimulate critical thought about America's status quo. He wanted the reader to be able to pick up on injustice and false narratives. As such, his writing encourages a desire for truth and awareness about what might hinder objectivity. Melville instructs the reader in a relatively indirect manner, which reflects his opposition to normative, dogmatic views. Melville's preference for ambiguity can lead to a misunderstanding of authorial intention and he may also be perceived as being overly pessimistic about the future. This is a side-effect that comes with being such a critical writer. A substantial amount of scholarly writing has been done on this topic. My hope is that by using narrative theory to compare "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and "Benito Cereno" in the light of critical thinking, I will be able to give Melville's work a new focus and more of a systematic discussion of narrative technique.

The first chapter will revolve around the lawyer as a narrator and the power of narration in "Bartleby, the Scrivener." I will look at how truth is always represented through some prism. There is never an objective truth. There is always some distortion between reality and appearance. What is crucial is to develop awareness about this incongruity. Melville encourages the reader to be self-critical and conscious about ideological bias. Critical thinking, and particularly acting in a critical way, presupposes an ability to first see what is moral and immoral.

In the second chapter, I will be looking at Captain Amasa Delano's focalisation in "Benito Cereno." He is largely portrayed as a rather dumb-witted protagonist, not able to pick up on the evil in himself and his surroundings. Unlike the lawyer in "Bartleby, the Scrivener," Delano's worldview is difficult to defend and easier to characterise as immoral. This might be considered only natural, since Melville thought slavery the nation's most serious crime. I will be comparing the two stories to show that critical thinking is not only difficult, but it is actively repressed by institutions such as the court system. The stories deal with critical thinking and truth in two different ways. One focuses on the ambiguity and evasive nature of truth itself. The other emphasizes that thinking about justice is not necessarily enough. Prejudice and dominant thinking function as a vicious circle from which it is difficult to break loose. The reader plays the most significant part in determining America's future.

2 ‘Reality and Dead Wall Reveries’: Narrative Layers in “Bartleby, the Scrivener”

Every day of my life makes me feel more and more how seldom a fact is accurately stated: how, almost invariably, when a story has passed through the mind of a third person, it becomes, so far as regards the impression that it makes in further repetitions, little better than a falsehood, and this, too, though the narrator be the most truth-seeking person in existence. How marvellous the tendency is! [...] Is truth a fantasy which we are to pursue forever and never grasp?
(Hawthorne 538)

What is truth? Is there such a thing as objective truth or is knowledge always subjective? In “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” Melville scrutinizes the division between truth and fiction. By blurring the lines between appearance and reality, Melville makes the reader play an active part in searching for truth. Truth is in a sense always being told, interpreted, represented through some angle or perspective. Melville uses focalization and narrative layers to complicate the storyline, tempting the reader to draw faulty conclusions. There are, in a sense, multiple realities in “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” one told by the narrator, one that supports Bartleby’s rebellion, and lastly the reader’s understanding of the text. Melville draws attention to the importance of seeking the truth, but also the difficulty of doing so.

“Bartleby, the Scrivener” can be seen to consist of three narrative layers, representing different perspectives on truth. The first layer revolves around the lawyer’s version of the fictional reality. As a narrator, he has the power to convince the narratee that he did all that he could in order help his employee, Bartleby. Unfortunately, he was not able to save him, but he cannot be blamed. The second layer is also connected to the power of narration and focalization, but in defence of Bartleby. The second layer is frequently seen as Melville’s intended meaning, and accordingly, often the topic of discussion for critics. The lawyer is more of a villain than a hero here. He is the cause of Bartleby’s alienation and eventual

decline. The lawyer's sense of morality and vision has been corrupted by capitalist ideology. It is only natural that the narrator's voice and vision will show some sign of personal bias. However, in "Bartleby, the Scrivener," this is a distinct feature. The narrator's way of reasoning may be said to hinder communication. Instead of making one sympathetic to Bartleby's woes, one is made aware of the lawyer's internal struggle. The lawyer is in part responsible for Bartleby's suffering. He is not able, nor perhaps willing, to be self-critical.

Taking a step further back, to what will be termed the third layer, the reader may pick up on a larger theme, namely truth itself. Melville uses the implied author to trick the reader into judging the narrator, asking the wrong questions. He shows how easy it is to judge the narrator like the lawyer did Bartleby. In order to really understand the text, one has to be aware of the inherent ambiguity. If the reader is to understand the textual dilemma, he too must be open-minded and self-reflective. The point is not to arrive at an objective conclusion, to determine a single meaning in the text, but to acquire an attitude of critical thinking—an ability to ask the appropriate questions. Though there may not be *one* fictional reality, some versions of reality are more representative or truthful than others.

Dividing the text into three layers may at first seem arbitrary. Certainly, all three layers coexist in the reading process. One might even argue that the third layer is not an aspect of the text, but a creation of the reader. I do agree that separating "Bartleby, the Scrivener" into three parts does not completely reflect the reading process. The reader may at different intervals spot the narrator's biased viewpoint, or one may completely fail to take Bartleby's side. The trouble is: if one were to discuss the three layers at the same time, mixing them together from the very onset, it would most likely result in an unsystematic analysis. The three layers are beneficial in terms of looking at both *what* is being told and *how* it is being told. By imposing an admittedly artificial distinction, it is easier to see how the text's various layers intertwine and clash with one another. Secondly, using the term "layer" simplifies the discussion of Genette's narrative "levels" later. It should be noted that the term layer is not meant in the sense of covering up or restricting vision. The narrative layers overlap and co-exist. It is more appropriate to think of them as a palimpsest, where all the layers are visible, but some more than others. Whether one chooses to focus on the hidden writing or that which is found on the surface is up to the reader.

Only by knowing how a text is structured, can the reader hope to understand its meaning (Bal 13). One's reading is nothing more than a subjective opinion about the text's

content, a proposal. If an interpretation is nothing more than a ‘proposal,’ it is only logical that it should be made as convincing and systematic as possible (Bal 10). Looking at the first layer, it is important to bear in mind the responsibility and possible abuse of power that comes with being a narrator. The reader may be tempted to blindly believe in the lawyer, overlooking his narrative inconsistencies. ‘A fundamental convention in narrative fiction is that we believe the narrator, unless the text at some point gives us a signal *not* to do so’ (Lothe 25). There are a number of reasons why one *should* be skeptical about the lawyer’s narration. In my discussion of the first layer, however, I want to point out how the narrative strategies used by the lawyer can make the reader accept his version of the truth.

The narrator ‘is the most central concept in the analysis of narrative texts’ (Bal 18). Almost equally important is the ‘focaliser.’ Together they ‘determine the narrative situation’ (Bal 18). The lawyer, being a character in the events he narrates, is a character-bound narrator (Bal 21). Interestingly, he is also a character-bound focaliser (Bal 150). Since the point of focalization does not change to another character during the story, the lawyer’s perceptions dominate the narrative situation. Bartleby, Nippers, Turkey, and Ginger Nut, are all focalised from without. The reader does not have any direct access to the focalised objects and has to rely on the narrator’s perception. This is a risky affair, since the lawyer may not share the reader’s sense of morality. The lawyer may be a relatively objective witness-narrator or he may be more interested in deceiving the narratee. I say “relatively” objective, because it is never possible to recount the past in exactly the same way as it originally happened. The reader should therefore always be wary of a narrator-focaliser. In this case, the narrator knows more than the reader, which means that he has the power to keep what really happened a secret (Bal 165).

The story consists of two parts: the ‘extradiegetic’ level and the ‘intradiegetic’ level; ‘any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed’ (italics in original, Genette 228). The extradiegetic level is immediately accessible to the reader. It is the point of departure. It is, in this case, particularly evident in the first part of the story and in the final part. The intradiegetic level is the lawyer’s narrative about Bartleby, his offices and his workers and is meant to have an ‘explanatory’ function (Genette 232). It is supposed to explain the lawyer’s sense of frustration and resignation in his relationship with Bartleby. The lawyer is looking

back in time, at his interaction with Bartleby. This is called ‘subsequent narration’ and is traditionally the most common form of narration (Genette 220).

No matter how honest or restricted the lawyer claims to be, representing the past gives the lawyer a certain freedom of expression. He is a part of the fictional reality, a homodiegetic narrator (Genette 245), which means that he can depict the past any way he wants to. This results in an untrustworthy ‘autobiographical form’ (Genette 247). I will return to the issue of ‘unreliability’ and how the narrative relates to truth and critical thinking in the discussion of second and third narrative layer. For now, it is enough to be aware of the possible divergence between that which is represented and what in reality happened.

If one is to be critical to the represented truth, it is crucial to have an ‘active, persistent, and careful consideration of [the narrator’s] belief’ (Dewey qtd. in Fisher 2). Critical thinking is more than merely judging, it means being able to see objects from someone else’s viewpoint. It is the opposite of being dismissive or bombastic, but being ‘reasonable, reflective,’ as Robert Ennis points out (qtd. in Fisher 4). Conscious that there are ‘lenses through which we view the world, [which] sometimes cloud our vision’ (Sterling 213), I will now look at the lawyer’s narrative. The first thing to notice is how the lawyer tries to present himself as a trustworthy ‘elderly man’ (Melville “Bartleby, the Scrivener” 1093). The extradiegetic level is structured in a way that is meant to make the reader sympathetic to his cause. The lawyer is ‘the old hearty who holds the floor’ (Berthoff 125) with more than thirty years of business experience (1093). Accordingly, he probably *has* been brought ‘into more than ordinary contact with what would seem an interesting and somewhat singular set of men’ (1093). The narrator aims at establishing reliability before he moves on to Bartleby, ‘who was a scrivener the strangest [he] ever saw or heard of’ (1093). He claims that Bartleby’s story needs to be told, or it would be ‘an irreparable loss to literature’ (1093). However, he admits that he is not fully able to explain his behaviour and eventual demise; Bartleby was ‘one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable’ (1093).

In the next paragraph, which is also part of the extradiegetic level, the narrator continues to construct his alibi. He claims that ‘some [...] description [of his business] is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the chief character about to be presented’ (1093). The implied irony here is that the information provided by the narrator lets the reader understand the lawyer, not Bartleby. The lawyer is out to defend his own ideals and way of living. He makes himself look like an ‘unambitious lawyer,’ ‘a man who from his youth

upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best' (1093). He does a 'snug business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds' 'in the cool tranquillity of a snug retreat' (1093). The repetition of snug is most likely meant to emphasize the narrator's innocent and homely attitude. He is not one to push anyone's buttons—far from it. As Dillingham humorously points out: 'never in literature has there been a greater advocate for not rocking the boat' (22).

To further strengthen his position as something of an innocent bystander, the narrator brings in the "expert witness" John Jacob Astor. Astor, 'a personage little given to poetic enthusiasm, had no hesitation in pronouncing [the lawyer-narrator's] first grand point to be prudence; [his] next, method' (1093). What is one to make of these key words? 'Prudence' can be seen to mean being cautious, heedful, considerate or economical. It is the opposite of squandering valuables or disregarding other people's opinions. 'Method' implies being systematic when trying to accomplish something, being orderly. The lawyer is structured in terms of planning. He has a logical and concrete way of thinking. He is a man who does not cause problems, nor is he a man who is afraid to take tough decisions. He *is* objective and to be trusted, at least if one were to ask John Jacob Astor.

What the extradiegetic level does, especially since it comes first in the narrative, is that it colours the remaining diegesis. It has a "framing function." Since no information about Bartleby has been disclosed yet, the reader is encouraged to accept the lawyer's words. Melville plays with the oral tradition of storytelling (Bickley 23), which gives the text a kind of 'exploratory looseness and variety in organisation' (Berthoff 117). The reader is made to think of Bartleby as a strange and mystical employee. The narrator positions himself in a favourable light, which results in a sympathetic but judgmental portrayal of Bartleby. When Bartleby is introduced as a 'motionless young man,' 'pallidly neat, pitiable respectable, incurably forlorn' (1097), the reader is more than willing to accept such a description. After all, the narrator spent the first five pages preparing the reader for such a portrayal. It is difficult to verify whether the narrator's feelings of melancholy and compassion derive from an understanding of Bartleby or if it is the result of a guilty conscience. Focalisation belongs to the past experiences, but the narrator remains temporally removed (Berthoff 121), past and present considerations intertwine. This is a difficult and ambiguous aspect of focalisation, which cannot be easily solved. The ending, however, does hold some clues as to whether or not the lawyer has truly changed.

The next couple of pages circle around the communication, or more precisely lack of communication, between Bartleby and the lawyer. Though Bartleby starts out working incessantly, he gradually loses interest. Finally, he refuses to work. The lawyer asks him why and Bartleby replies, 'I would prefer not to' (1098). The lawyer is thrown into a state of shock and despair. He makes a number of excuses as to why he does not throw Bartleby out or react in the "usual" manner. 'Had there been any thing ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises' (1099). The same event is repeated through the remainder of the text. The lawyer commands Bartleby to help him copy, Bartleby prefers not to, the lawyer responds with shock, despair, and anger, and so the circle of events continues. 'Strictly speaking the *identity* of these multiple occurrences is debatable' (Genette 113). It is not exactly the same event. Sometimes the lawyer is humbled, sometimes he feels 'browbeaten in some unprecedented and violently unreasonable way' (1100). He may think 'Poor fellow [...] he means no mischief' or be filled with hatred (1101). Still, the narrator does not give up. The sheer number of repetitions is most likely supposed to indicate the lawyer's patience. He does not give in to the 'inherent selfishness of the human heart' (1105).

After a while, the narrator comes to the conclusion that he has no other choice than to tear himself 'from [Bartleby] whom [he] had so longed to be rid of' (1113). He has tried to use his prudence and method to understand what pains his employee, but has not been successful. No matter how systematic or logical he has been, the narrator has not been able to decipher Bartleby's behaviour. It did not have anything to do with the ginger nuts he ate; 'No, that would imply spicy' (1100). It was not an issue of money, 'you have not even touched the money yet' (1110). Nor did it have anything to do with impaired vision, after continuous writing in the dark office. This proves a stark contrast to the first couple of pages. The narrator had no trouble distinguishing what bothered his other employees. Nippers was 'the victim of two evil powers—ambition and indigestion' (1095). Nature 'had charged him [...] with an irritable, brandy-like disposition' (1096). Turkey displays 'a strange, inflamed, flurried, flighty, recklessness' (1094). This can only be a sign of excessive consumption of 'red ink' (1096). And Ginger Nut, his last employee, was too young to understand the workings of the business world. The narrator reasons that 'these troubles of [his] touching the scrivener' are 'not for a mere mortal like [him] to fathom' (1111).

After a while, the lawyer gives in to the pressure of his colleagues, 'the constant friction of illiberal minds [which] wears out at last the best resolves of the more generous'

(1111). He is no longer able to live with Bartleby's 'pallid haughtiness,' his 'morbid moodiness' (1105) and assents to having him removed from the premises. Bartleby is sent to prison, and the lawyer comes to visit him. He does all that he can to make Bartleby's stay comfortable, even bribing the prison guard. He tries to emphasize that the Tombs is not such a 'sad place.' There is 'the sky' and some 'grass' (1116). But Bartleby prefers not to listen to the lawyer.

This is where the intradiegetic level ends. What follows is an epilogue. The narrative voice and focalisation are once again parallel and return to the time just preceding the introductory paragraphs. In the epilogue, the narrator 'divulge[s] one little item of rumour' (1117). He has delayed this information, this secret, so that the narratee may come to share his point of view, his focalisation, in the main narrative. This is in part speculation, but it seems that by delaying this little "rumour," the narrator hopes that the narratee will be less judgmental when reading his story. The secret is that Bartleby worked in a Dead Letter Office, looking over and researching mail that for some reason could not be delivered. According to the narrator, Bartleby was 'by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness' (1117), but working at the Dead Letter Office pushed him over the edge. The lawyer is filled with hopeless remorse at not being able to help Bartleby. But he still insists that it was not his fault. No one could have understood this enigma. In a voice of frustration he exclaims, 'Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!' (1118).

This is the lawyer's narrative; what he wants the narratee to believe. This is not necessarily the same as what the author wants the reader to believe. It might be quite the opposite of Melville's sense of morality. If one is to look at the untold narrative, that which is not being said, one may want to defend Bartleby. Why did Bartleby commit suicide? Is the lawyer partly to blame? And if he is, why does he not admit it? Critics, in relation to the second narrative layer, have often seen the lawyer as a representative of the American business mentality of the 1840s and '50s in New York. According to such a claim, the narrator is a man who is more interested in sustaining the status quo than changing his ways. Looking more closely at the time period, it is not difficult to see how critics may have arrived at such a conclusion. In New York, there were a number of strikes and clashes between the police and tailors (Foley 90). The city was a breeding ground for 'mass meetings, parades, rallies, demonstrations, and strikes' (Kuebrich 381), which made Walt Whitman at one point call 'New York [...] the most radical city in America' (Foley 90). The population grew from

124,000 to 814,000 between 1820 and 1860, causing a sharp rise in the real estate prices (Kuebrich 384). John Jacob Astor, an admired and personal “friend” of the lawyer, was one of the individuals who benefitted the most from the increase in population. Upon his death, Astor was arguably ‘the most hated man in New York,’ collecting more than 200,000 per annum in rents (Foley 93).

Critics also discuss the text’s emphasis on religion. The lawyer’s rhetoric, his rationality and fellow-feeling is many a time related to Protestant preachers such as Jonathan Edwards and Joseph Priestley (1111). In the mid-nineteenth century, Protestantism in New York fused with capitalism to spawn an emphasis on hard work and reward. Protestant ethics, however, were often used as ‘a way as to legitimate inequality and class privilege’ (Kuebrich 386). The lawyer, especially in the first half of the story, seems to support a notion that in New York City there is a competency ‘within the reach of every man who is disposed to exercise ordinary industry and frugality; and [that] the labouring portion of the community is prosperous and happy’ (Stuart 387). To wealthy men like the narrator, ‘poverty instructed the faithful about the worldly wages of sin or, in the case of the deserving poor, provided fit objects for the charity of the rich’ (Kuebrich 395). The lawyer can be seen as a man who distorts Christian principles so as to legitimize his ‘doctrine of assumptions’ (1109).

The lawyer as a character has two purposes. He is a parody of a critical thinker, displaying little ability or volition to change his mind-set. He also functions as an example of how narration can “bend” the truth, intertwining objectivity and subjectivity. The problem with interpretation and representation is that ‘there is more than one way to contrive and construct the world [...]. We do not deal with the world-in-itself, but with the world-as-we-define-it in relation to our interests, perspective and point of view.’ ‘For purposes of self-protection,’ one may presume that one’s own vision of truth is ‘moral and objective,’ when one’s viewpoints ‘are in fact amoral and subjective’ (Paul qtd. in Moon 59). Anyone can make an argument in order to make one’s claim seem true, but that does not make it an objective conclusion. Objectivity involves an ability to consider past, present, and future. One has to be empathetic to the views of others, but also self-critical.

As a homodiegetic narrator, the lawyer is ‘active in the plot’ (Lothe 21). Being a focaliser gives him an ‘advantage’ over the other characters (Bal 149). Since his ‘acts of perception are part of the story [...], focalization is just one of the many rhetorical strategies at his disposal’ (Rimmon-Kenan 85). The narrator controls the flow of information. His

perceptions dictate not just objects, landscapes or events, all the elements are being focalised (Bal 153). The lawyer's narrative strength, however, also works to his disadvantage. He is an 'overt' or 'explicit' narrator (Chatman 222), which makes it somewhat easier to separate the narrator's viewpoint from the fictional reality. The way an object is represented can give more information about the perceiver than the perceived (Bal 156).

Narrators like the lawyer are commonly referred to as "unreliable narrators." The term was first introduced by Wayne C. Booth: 'A narrator is reliable when he speaks or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms)' (158). "The implied author," according to Booth, 'includes not only the extractable meanings but also the moral and emotional content of each bit of action and suffering of all of the characters' (73). It is a way to separate the author's intention and the textual meaning (Booth 75). The implied author is a re-construction by the reader and 'instructs us silently, through the design of the whole' (Chatman 148). Thus, 'Unreliable narrators [...] differ markedly depending on how far and in what direction they depart from their *implied* author's norms' (Booth 159, emphasis mine). If the author wants to challenge the reader, unreliable narration may help (Booth 378). The distance from narrator to implied author may be 'moral,' 'intellectual,' or 'temporal' (Booth 156). Unreliability means that we are suspicious of the narrator's 'sincerity or competence' to tell the truth (Chatman 149). By looking at the different interactants and information provided, the reader concludes that the events could not have been such (Chatman 233).

Locating the implied author can be troublesome. How does one decide what set of norms the text represents? (Rimmon-Kenan 87). For the benefit of this part of the discussion, I will presume that the implied author can be seen as a critical stand against the lawyer's values. The argument goes: Bartleby is *not* an enigma. He could have been understood and "saved." The lawyer is at least in part responsible. Instead of being empathetic and understanding, the lawyer prefers to remain judgmental and self-centred. He has created a moral safe spot both physically and mentally, which keeps him from changing his business mentality. It also keeps him from feeling guilty about the way he treats his employees, especially Bartleby. The lawyer's 'prudence' and 'method,' his preference for living a 'safe' life, is not a positive characteristic. Rather than being tolerant and logical, he is scared and evasive. He is unable to communicate with Bartleby, because he is living in denial and does not want to change. Opening up to Bartleby would mean critically considering the immorality

of his business ethics, which, to him, is not a viable option. ‘The lawyer is a man out to control a tiny universe’ with a self-serving rhetoric (Pinsker 18). This is why he ‘will never succeed in “characterizing” Bartleby’ (Bickley 29-30).

As mentioned earlier, the extradiegetic level has a framing function. Since it comes first, it colours the reader’s perception of the remaining story. And since the first five pages revolve around him, the ‘chief character about to be presented’ is not Bartleby, but the lawyer (1093). The lawyer admits that ‘from his youth upwards, [he] has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best’ (1093). He is one of those ‘unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause’ (1093). He claims that all those who know him ‘consider [him] an eminently *safe* man,’ which keeps him from getting ‘proverbially energetic and nervous’ (1093). There is reason to suspect that the lawyer is not the honest man he claims to be. After all, he does insist on doing a ‘snug business among rich men’s bonds and mortgages and title-deeds’ ‘in the cool tranquillity of a snug retreat’ (1093). The repeated use of “snug” and “cool” make the reader cautious about his intentions. He makes a living by not indulging ‘in dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages’ (1093). This could be a way of saying that he would rather overlook signs of immorality than to face the causes of such sentiments. ‘The narrator’s sentimental approach to narrative is a means of extracting himself from a highly challenging situation that would necessitate an ideological change, a shift this comfortable narrator is clearly unwilling to consider’ (Post-Lauria 186).

In short, the lawyer is a capitalist. This is not such a negative trait in itself. As Tocqueville pointed out, an increase in wealth may contribute to democratic growth. But when an obsession, it can easily lead to moral degradation. The lawyer’s interest in “prudence” and “method” overshadows feelings of fraternity and common sense. He is one of those who ‘literally wall themselves off into comfortable communities, both physically and socially, in which they can safely avert their eyes from the ugly realities that afflict so many’ (West 65). Particularly revealing is his relationship with Astor. As mentioned, Astor was one of the most detested personalities in New York, an allusion which most contemporary readers would have picked up on. The lawyer, however, ‘love[s] to repeat’ the name, which he does three times in one paragraph. The lawyer may claim that he does not do so out of ‘vanity,’ but because he admires the name’s ‘rounded and orbicular sound’ (1093). It seems more likely

that the lawyer repeats the name because it indicates his affiliation with one of New York's most prominent business men.

The lawyer's problem is that he is not able to criticize his own business mentality. Capitalism is more than what he believes in. It is who he *is*, as can be seen from his rhetoric. John Jacob Astor 'rings like unto bullion,' which of course is a pun on precious metal (1093). Later, when considering what to do with Bartleby's "unreasonable" behaviour, he thinks, 'To befriend Bartleby; to humour him in his strange wilfulness, will *cost* me little or nothing' (1101, italics mine). 'He is useful to me [...]. Here I can *cheaply purchase* a delicious self-approval' (1101, italics mine). The narrator is accustomed to living a life where money determines whether an action is right or wrong. That is why he is shocked when Bartleby does not accept his money upon being let go. It makes him think that Bartleby may be a con-man, since he suddenly refuses to work. Even when Bartleby is sent to the Tombs, he believes that his condition will improve if he bribes Mr. Cutlets. He does not see that Bartleby is struggling with a moral dilemma that cannot be alleviated through money. To the narrator, it is all about business, being rational and systematic.

The narrator tries to convince himself and the narratee that his employees are struggling not because of the workplace, but because of personal eccentricities. Nippers is 'the victim of two evil powers-ambition and indigestion' (1095), Turkey has 'an irritable, brandy-like disposition' (1096), and Ginger Nut was plainly too young to understand the business. The narrator is unable or unwilling to see what troubles his employees. He seems to think that they misbehave because they drink—when really, they drink in order to deal with their monotonous work. He reverses the chain of causation. He makes ambition seem like a negative trait. Though the lawyer admits 'copying law papers [is] proverbially a dry, husky sort of business' (1097), 'It is a dull, wearisome, and lethargic affair' (1098), he does not realize the exactitude of his own statement. He observes that Turkey every day 'blaze[s] like a grate full of Christmas coals' (1095), and draws the conclusion that Turkey '[is] a man whom prosperity harm[s]' (1095). Nippers experiences 'continual discontent with the height of his table,' and displays 'a nervous testiness and grinning irritability' (1095). He constantly lowers and heightens his table to make it fit, but to no use, 'Nippers knew not what he wanted' (1095). This is not the case. Nippers knows what he wants, but is banned from achieving it.

Instead of firing or reprimanding them, the lawyer finds a way to manipulate his employees, similar to how he tries to mislead the narratee. Since Turkey grows angry after

twelve o'clock, and Nippers 'nervousness' was mainly observable in the morning, their subjective misdemeanours cancel each other out. This may not at first seem like manipulation, more like a happy coincidence. And such may have been the case, were it not for the manner in which the narrator relates this strange phenomenon. Nippers and Turkey, but also Ginger Nut, are focalised in a way that makes their "irrational" behaviour seem trivial. The narrator uses a humorous tone to depict characteristics that should not be taken lightly. 'I never had to deal with their eccentricities at one time. Their fits relieved each other like guards [...] This was a good natural arrangement under the circumstances' (1097). Turkey's frustration and anger 'continued blazing' with a 'gradual wane—till 6 o'clock [...] after which I saw no more of the proprietor of the face, which gaining its meridian with the sun, seemed to set with it, to rise, culminate, and decline the following day, *with the like regularity and undiminished glory*' (1094, italics mine). The lawyer has found a way to overcome their work-related inadequacies. He may claim that he keeps them in his employment due to an 'appeal to [his] fellow-feeling' (1095). The truth of the matter is that they are "useful."

This is also the reason why he hires Bartleby. He engages him, because he thinks that a 'man of so singularly sedate an aspect [...] might operate beneficially upon the flighty temper of Turkey, and the fiery one of Nippers' (1097). The lawyer has already separated himself from his other employees by using a folding door. And he is convinced that by 'procur[ing] a high green folding screen,' he 'might entirely isolate Bartleby from [his] sight' (1098). '[T]hus, in a manner, privacy and society [are] conjoined' (1098). The lawyer is trying to make use of Bartleby's expertise, without having to watch his 'sanguine temperament' (1098). Bartleby will have none of it.

Before I move on to discuss the confrontation between Bartleby and the lawyer, I want to comment on Melville's parable of the walls. When hiring Bartleby, the lawyer places him 'up to a small side-window' 'which originally had afforded a lateral view of certain grimy back-yards and bricks, but which, owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all' (1097-1098). This event in many ways sums up the lawyer's major flaw and is a strong sign of unreliability. He is more interested in the existing conditions than change. He prefers the comfort of a sheltered life to the challenge of engaging in 'dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages' (1093). The lawyer used to be able to see injustice around him. With age, however, due to new walls being built, he cannot see immorality any more. Incidentally, the lawyer does not mention who is responsible for these new 'subsequent erections.' Has the

lawyer wilfully imposed restrictions upon himself or has a lifetime on Wall Street altered his rationality. To me, this is beside the point. Of course one's surroundings will have some impact on the way reality is perceived. But what matters is not one's experience with inequality, but how one responds to such injustice.

Bartleby's response is made explicitly clear: he "prefers not to." Repeatedly, the narrator tries to understand Bartleby's "refusal" to go over his copies. He tries to come to terms with what is troubling him. 'Will you tell me, Bartleby, where you were born?' (1105). 'Will you tell me *any thing* about yourself?' (1105). Bartleby takes a glance at the lawyer's 'bust of Cicero' located directly behind the lawyer and gives no answer (1099). It seems that to Bartleby, the lawyer is as much a man as his statue, nothing but empty rhetoric. He is a 'pale imitation of a man' (Dillingham 33), 'a pasteboard mask of the world that had humiliated [him]' (Murray 10). Bartleby sees no point in discussing anything with his employer. The narrator observes Bartleby 'in his dead-wall reveries,' standing alone looking out on the walls that surround him, seeing nothing but gray concrete, or the real Wall Street. But the lawyer still asks 'what is the reason [for this misbehaviour]' (1107). Bartleby replies, 'Do you not see the reason for yourself?' (1107). The lawyer, of course, does not and tries to help Bartleby by offering him another line of work. But no matter what kind of employment he suggests, Bartleby asserts that he 'would prefer not to make any change,' though '[he is] not particular' (1114). Even when sent to prison, Bartleby does not want his assistance; 'I know you' and 'I want nothing to say to you' (1116).

As I mentioned earlier, if one were to believe the narrator, that Bartleby *is* an enigma and that he did all he could to help him, Bartleby's behaviour may be called ungrateful and unproductive. The multiplicity of similar events makes the narrator seem patient and resilient. And the epilogue gratifies the reader's curiosity by bringing him some understanding about Bartleby's background. But a little insight into the lawyer's rhetorical contradictions renders a different image. The ending seems a superficial explanation for a complex problem. Bartleby was not 'by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness' (1117). The sum of his personal experiences, including the time he spent on Wall Street, has put him down. And the narrator makes it seem like he did not know 'whether [he] should divulge one little item of rumour' (1117), as though he had not planned to do so all along. Already on the first page, he lets the reader know that there is only one possible way to explain Bartleby's behaviour, namely 'one vague report which will appear in the sequel' (1093). The narrator tries to

persuade 'the reader by delaying various bits of information' (Rimmon-Kenan 121). The epilogue, since it in a sense is a part of the extradiegetic level, present tense, proves that the lawyer's encounter with Bartleby has not changed him in any profound way. It seems more likely that the narrator has written about this 'strange creature' out of a guilty conscience than out of understanding (1112).

But how could he have understood Bartleby? The lawyer is a man of assumptions, whereas Bartleby tends towards preferences. Basing one's world view on assumptions means relying on appearance and not reality. The narrator assumes that his focalisation, his capitalist ideology is true, and 'upon that assumption build[s] all [he] ha[s] to say' (1108). His narrative is an attempt to convince himself and the narratee that he is right. Those who object are a 'little deranged' and their objections 'unreasonable' (1116). He does not seem able or willing to understand the impact such an attitude has on those around him. He does not see that 'Democracy is not only about the working of the political system, but more profoundly about individuals being empowered and enlightened' (West 69). He is the opposite of a critical thinker, a distorted reflection of Emersonian "Self-Reliance." He maintains 'the integrity of [his] own mind' ("Self-Reliance" 535), but he does not give 'an independent, genuine verdict' ("Self-Reliance" 534). Worried that Bartleby might 'perplex [his] visitors; and scandalize [his] professional reputation' (1112), the lawyer is in no way the 'great man [...] who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude' ("Self-Reliance" 536). He is comfortable with the monotony of conformity and gives in to pressure. He does not change, because 'That always feels at first as if you ha[ve] lost something' (Shaw 316).

Melville wrote that 'It is better to fail in originality, than to succeed in imitation' (Melville, "Mosses" 223). '[I]t is a sign of strength to be weak, to know it' (Melville, "Letters to the Hawthornes" 238-239). Bartleby seems more able and willing to take a stand against what he seems to think of as capitalist immorality. At the same time, he also gives up. Cornel West writes that, 'The oppressive effect of the prevailing market moralities leads to a form of sleepwalking from womb to tomb' (27). Bartleby's rebellion is like that of a child. It is a "regression stage" (Murray 24). He first says "No," to assert his solitude. He then gradually stops moving and ends up curled together like a foetus, with 'his knees drawn up, and lying on his side' (1117). '[T]o many, our democratic system seems so broken that they have simply lost faith that their participation could really matter' (West 64). Like Tocqueville

predicted, the critical voice yields at length. On Wall Street, capitalism has not loosened the bonds between classes, but instead strengthened them. This might be why Bartleby's rebellion is one of "preference," not strong "volition."

He has realised that his suffering is 'not particular' (1114). He is but one out of many. This is why he does not accept any of the lawyer's suggestions for alternative work. He does not believe in change. The only thing he can do is to mildly assert his rights, "he prefers not to." It is quite the opposite of assuming something, but it is in no way a forceful refusal. Bartleby's retort perplexes the narrator because to him the walls of Wall Street are mostly physical. To Bartleby, they stretch from the physical walls of the office, to the walls of language and human understanding (Pinsker 17). Bartleby does not mind being sent to prison, it seems, because at least there he is permitted 'freely to wander' (1115). Prison, paradoxically, provides him with a sense of freedom. Bartleby has understood that one can be a prisoner 'and still be independent; and, contrarily, one can be "free" and still be a prisoner' (Dillingham 43). 'The difference between Wall Street and the Tombs was an illusion of the lawyer's, not Bartleby' (Marx 97). Bartleby is the only one who will die with 'his dim [...] eyes open' (1117).

To sum up, the first narrative layer concerns the lawyer's personal narration. He is convinced that he did all in his power to help Bartleby. He tried to offer him money. He tried to offer him a different line of work. He visited him in prison. Bartleby would not accept his help, nor anyone else's for that matter. Bartleby is not to be understood. The lawyer was from the very beginning unable to save Bartleby, because Bartleby was beyond saving.

The second layer sees the lawyer as largely responsible for Bartleby's demise. Bartleby may have been a puzzle to the lawyer, but not to the avid reader. The lawyer fails to be self-critical. He is not willing or able to change and is therefore barred from understanding Bartleby. It is his own fault. Whether he is conscious of it or not, his narrative is unreliable and represents a Wall-Street business mentality. The lawyer bases his judgment on assumption, appearance over reality, which means that he can never really grasp what upsets his employees. He has built walls to protect him from the suffering which surrounds him.

Who is right? Which version of the fictional reality represents the truth—both or neither? The narrator tries to convince the narratee that he is honest, logical and innocent. The power of being a narrator and focaliser gives his claim legitimacy. Most critics, however, see

the narrator as the perpetrator. Accordingly, they draw the conclusion that the implied author is meant to represent anti-capitalist sentiments. The text's structure tempts the reader into drawing an either-or dichotomy. It shows how easily one may draw faulty conclusions. The reader is duped into thinking that reality is black or white, a distinction Melville deplored.

Moving to the third narrative layer, I take slightly different approach to the lawyer's narrative. Both of the two aforementioned readings are legitimate, but only to a certain degree. I believe that the text is not meant to represent such a specific and ideological meaning. Upon the publication of *The Piazza Tales*, Melville deleted "A Story of Wall-Street" from the title (Bickley 39). It is difficult to certify why, but it is possible that he felt that the subtitle gave the wrong connotations. It was not meant as a story about a geographical area or capitalism, but about human experience. In "Bartleby, the Scrivener," capitalism is only partially under scrutiny. It provided Melville with a means of creating an inner conflict, against which he could discuss the ambiguous nature of truth. In terms of critical thinking, capitalism is a suitable topic since it can both be seen to strengthen and weaken democratic growth.

The story is meant to make the reader aware of how narratives are seldom unbiased. Even the reader needs to be conscious of dogmatic views and prejudice. A democratic reader's perception will result in 'a continual interplay between modified expectations and transformed memories' (Iser 111). The reader's perception of the fictional truth, who is right and who is wrong, gradually reinvents itself. There is a kind of 'wandering viewpoint,' an 'intensified struggle for balance,' which results in 'illusion-building and illusion-breaking' (Iser 129). Texts like "Bartleby, the Scrivener," are inherently ambiguous. In order to come to terms with the uncertainty of the different narrative layers, the critical reader needs to be 'open-minded, [and have a] tolerant awareness of the complexities, ambiguities, and nuances in life' (Eco xxix). Bartleby and the lawyer are both responsible for the failure to communicate with one another. Both the first and the second layer and can be called unreliable. It is too easy to blame the lawyer. The internal coherence of the text seems to discourage such a reading (Eco 45).

'Few would go to the measures that [the lawyer] does to provide for an unproductive, uncommunicative, and unwanted employee' (Kuebrich 401). He offers him a different line of work, to bring him home. He lets Bartleby take some time off, if that would help. He visits Bartleby in prison and bribes the prison guard. He tries to understand why he is suffering, but

fails to do so. There is a limit to how much can be required of a person, who by definition, is one's employer. Capitalism presupposes some level of conformity, some hierarchical organization to ensure efficiency. This is not to say that the lawyer is innocent, far from it. As Melville pointed out, there is little admirable of placing a business rationality before compassion. 'The head only gives the richer and the better flavor. I stand for the heart. To the dogs with his head' (Melville, "Letters to the Hawthornes" 235). But it might be that the lawyer does not fully deserve the treatment he receives.

Most of the lawyer's generalizations and moral judgments can and probably should be deemed unreliable. He does, however, have one valid point: 'up to a certain point the thought or sight of misery enlists our best affections; but, in certain special cases, beyond that point it does not' (1105). One may aim at understanding a fellow human being, but sometimes this is not going to have any positive results. At some point, self-preservation and individualism limit how far one will or can go to help. 'They err who would assert that invariably this is owing to the inherent selfishness of the human heart. It rather proceeds from a certain hopelessness of remedying excessive and organic ill' (1105). When realizing that compassion 'cannot lead to effectual succour, common sense bids the soul be rid of it' (1105).

Bartleby seems so 'chock-full of pent-up bitterness and hate' that nothing will alleviate his anger (Murray 13). It is as though he feels 'justified in making [the lawyer's] conscience prick him till it hurt[s]' (Murray 10). This, of course, is only speculation, since it is impossible for the reader to truly understand him. But it does seem like Bartleby is not able to see the lawyer as anything other than another Wall Street employer. In a sense, Bartleby is no more of a critical thinker than the lawyer. Neither Bartleby nor the lawyer are capable or willing to carefully and persistently consider someone else's belief. They both seem to firmly believe that they are the only ones capable of separating appearance and reality. They do not seem to have the ability, the attitude, or the skill to change their perception of truth. Bartleby is a kind of parody of Henry David Thoreau's need for solitude in *Walden*, whereas the lawyer represents an example of Emerson's credo, 'imitation is suicide' ("Self-Reliance" 533).

What Melville aims at doing is making the reader conscious of the inherent duplicity in searching for truth. '[T]he critical thinker's objective [is] analyzing and assessing arguments with the aim of getting at the truth of a matter' (Moon 257). Truth is a circular process which does not surrender to objectivity. The opposite would be complete absorption

with the subjective. Truth is a matter of degree (Moon 57). The reader can never arrive at a complete understanding of truth, but some readings may be more plausible than others. With “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” the reader is forced to contemplate all the various versions of truth. An interesting metaphor is to be found in *Moby-Dick*. Like Ishmael’s arriving at the Spouter Inn, spotting a strange picture, the reader tries to understand the text’s significance. But it was only by ‘by diligent study and a series of systematic visits to it, and careful inquiry of the neighbours, that you could any way arrive at an understanding of its purpose’ (11).

3 ‘One Dull Round of Command’: Racist Idealism in “Benito Cereno.”

The negro, who is plunged in this abyss of evils, scarcely feels his own calamitous situation. Violence made him a slave, and the habit of servitude gives him the thoughts and desires of a slave; he admires his tyrants more than he hates them, and finds his joy and his pride in the servile imitation of those who oppress him: his understanding is degraded to the level of his soul.
(Tocqueville 394)

In the last chapter, I showed how “Bartleby, the Scrivener” can be seen as a comment on the need for self-criticism in the search for truth. Critical thinking involves contemplating the difference between subjectivity and objectivity when discussing appearance and reality. The text can be seen as a kind of meta-study, an epistemological approach to how the reader’s understanding is always connected to someone’s perspective. Melville encourages the reader to be aware that truth in its very nature is elusive. The point is to be able to see different sides, and consider the internal coherence of a text, in order to come up with a valid reading. The ability to search for truth in a self-critical manner is not restricted to the world of literature. It is a democratic necessity for the individual and society to move forward.

However, critical thinking involves more than awareness of the multivalence of truth. It requires more than a philosophical meditation on the nature of presumptions. Critical thinking is related to the individual’s ability to be self-critical, but also to how society at large reflects on its own actions. In “Benito Cereno,” Melville contextualises a more concrete form of critical thinking. He uses literature to map arguments used by slavery apologists. Young America considered itself to be ‘pressing toward a future of freedom, a kind of human dignity believed unprecedented in the world’ (Morrison 33). America was to be ‘a flight from oppression and limitation to freedom and possibility’ (Morrison 34). Through the main character, Captain Amasa Delano, Melville’s writing can be seen as a seemingly anachronistic response to Toni Morrison’s request in *Playing in the Dark*. She wrote that the well-established study of the black man ‘should be joined by another, equally important one: the

impact of racism on those who perpetuate it' (11). Literature should consider 'what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters' (12). With "Benito Cereno," Melville directs the reader's attention to the cause and effect of slavery. He turns the American white ideology back on the perpetrator. The story points out how society has institutionalized mechanisms that not only affirm immoral behaviour, but at the same time suppress critical voices. "Benito Cereno" is an attack on how a racist ideology may dictate and counteract democratic progress.

Captain Amasa Delano's story is in many ways similar to that of the lawyer in "Bartleby, the Scrivener." Melville's use of expressive muteness, scenery which is functional to the theme, repeated events, and a range of character types results in a number of structural resemblances. Both stories deal with appearances and reality, the inconceivable character of true knowledge. Both Delano and the lawyer can be seen as men of assumptions. They rely on preconceived notions of how the world is structured and are unwilling to change. However, there is one distinct difference, reflected in the use of focalization and narration. "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is of a more ambiguous nature, it is easier to be compassionate towards the protagonist's behaviour. It deals with capitalism, which can be seen to both strengthen and weaken democratic development, whereas "Benito Cereno" is connected to slavery and misplaced idealism. Melville abhorred slavery and its consequences. This might be why he is less willing to allow the same *type* of narrative ambiguity.

Upon reading the real Captain Amasa Delano's *Narrative of Voyages and Travels*, Melville must have seen something in this historical record that he could not accept. The original Delano, since it is his narrative, is allowed to determine what information is revealed. It is his perspective that dominates the story, with no traces of self-criticism. Possibly, this is what triggered Melville to rewrite Delano's autobiographical encounter with the slave rebellion. Melville was repulsed by the historical figure of Captain Amasa, seeing a mirror image of the moral stagnation the United States faced in the 1850s. With "Benito Cereno," Melville seems to be challenging the idea of Delano as a benevolent bachelor. Melville makes the reader take sides; either one is opposed to slavery or one is a supporter of slavery. The narrator is more trustworthy than the lawyer is in "Bartleby, the Scrivener." He makes Delano look like a fool. Delano's perception is proven wrong, repeatedly. The hopeless irony of both the original Delano's story and the fictional narrative is that the court system reprimands the black slaves, but rewards Delano. Unlike what might be the case with Bartleby, the narrator

does not question whether or not Delano is to blame. Though he represents an ideology that did not originate in him, Delano is responsible for keeping it alive. The question is rather: How can America stand for such injustice? How can the situation be alleviated? And what does the future hold, if Americans are unwilling or unable to change? The narrative is meant to inspire action and self-reflection on a national level. It is an attempt to prevent a pending interracial blood-bath (Karcher 62), the post-apocalyptic doom depicted in “The Encantadas” (Melville).

Before I move on to the main discussion, I want to counter in advance any claims that Melville was not an abolitionist. If valid, such a claim would undermine the succeeding discussion. Strictly speaking, Melville was not an abolitionist in the usual sense. Most abolitionists thought slavery was the primary obstacle keeping America from achieving its democratic potential. Melville, on the other hand, maintained that the South’s support of slavery and the North’s acceptance of it were only one out of a number of reasons why America did not progress as a nation (Karcher 17). In terms of an abolitionist versus an anti-abolitionist stand, though, Melville certainly belonged to the former. Putting this aside, there have been critics who claim that for instance “Benito Cereno” makes Babo ‘a monster out of Gothic fiction at its worst, not at its best,’ that ‘the story is an artistic miscarriage’ (Arvin 122-123), and that Delano in no way represents Melville’s criticism of American idealism (Guttman). Sidney Kaplan writes that ‘the image of Melville as subtle abolitionist [...] may be a construction of generous wish rather than hard fact’ (167). Kaplan underlines that the text itself does not prove that Melville was an abolitionist.

It is true that “Benito Cereno,” like so much of Melville’s writing, is not direct in championing the rights of marginalized groups. Melville disliked such overt descriptions of right and wrong. He did not make his authorly intentions easily detectable. This has led to misinterpretations. For instance, Melville does not make the blacks seem innocent or incapable of evil, far from it. And when he points out that Delano’s racist presumptions do not reflect reality, Melville leaves it up to the reader to dissolve the textual dilemma. This has led some critics to think that Melville is using “slavery” as a background to discuss larger themes, such as the universal feeling of depravity (Emery 304, Feltenstein 152), truth and vision (Dillingham 247), or the difference between authority and power (Canaday, Jr.). To me, this does not represent a gross misunderstanding of Melville’s writing. The story is

indirectly connected to such topics. But that does not refute the claim that Melville's main concern in this story is slavery in 1850s America.

One might say that the possibility of misinterpretation is proof that the story cannot be said to have an abolitionist agenda—a sign of literary weakness on Melville's part. I would argue the opposite. It is a natural extension of Melville's desires as a writer and characteristic of the time in which he wrote. The era put specific demands on how literature reacted to moral dilemmas. Melville asserted that it was typical of men to refuse to accept any objective understanding. They dislike reformists, and hence disregard their message. 'Are not reformers almost universally laughing stocks?' 'Let any clergyman try to preach the Truth from its very stronghold, the pulpit, and they would ride him out of his church on his own pulpit banister,' he reflects (Melville, "Letters to the Hawthornes" 234). Americans, endowed with post-revolutionary optimism, tended to dislike the sceptic (Tocqueville 321). People may 'not be willing to die for their opinions, but they are rarely willing to change them' (Tocqueville 231).

For those who are still in doubt about Melville's position on slavery, think only of Melville's loving portrayal of comradeship experienced by the two sailors, Ishmael and Queequeg in *Moby-Dick*. From their very first encounter at the Spouter Inn, they are inseparable. Queequeg is affectionately described as one of the bravest among the crew aboard the Pequod. Or think of Melville's sympathetic depiction of Pip's suffering and desolation. Left in the water, he like Bartleby, was little more than 'a bit of wreck in the mid Atlantic' ("Bartleby, the Scrivener" 1107). Melville's experience with the inhabitants of the Marquesas, changed his perspective on race and civilisation. They may have been primitive to the Western eye, but Melville looked beyond what might be thought of as a barbaric culture, and admired their fraternal treatment of one another, as reflected in *Typee*. And in *Redburn*, Melville shows how it is circumstances that largely determine man's behavior, not ethnicity. White and black classifications show no significance in relation to abilities. If one is still not convinced of Melville's struggle to reinvent a more honest image of the black man, "Benito Cereno" should be sufficient evidence.

Having established some understanding of Melville's writing and the culture to which he belonged, I now return to the text. First of all, it is crucial to point out how the narrator and focaliser influence the reader's interpretive activities. Melville's narrative devices in "Benito Cereno" stand apart from those found in "Bartleby, the Scrivener." The lawyer, as a narrator-

focaliser, is allowed to determine what part of the fictional past to include and what parts to omit. Melville has given the lawyer the power of focalisation and narration, so that the lawyer's perceptions dominate and restrict the reader's insight. At the same time, the structure of the lawyer's narrative, his insistence on 'prudence' and 'method,' his capitalist emphasis, contradict his claims of being honest and believable. This results in what I have termed three narrative layers, representing different possible interpretations about the textual meaning. There is a substantial moral ambiguity, which is integral to the reading process. One does not know if the lawyer's narrative is reliable or not. Hence, it is a challenge for the reader to either dismiss or support the lawyer's actions.

In "Benito Cereno," there is less of a chance that the reader will misinterpret the implied author. There is only a minor distance between the narrator's voice and the fictional reality. In contrast, there is distinct difference between the narrator's opinions and the values of the main character, Delano. This is part of the effect of using an extradiegetic and heterodiegetic narrator. The narrator is not a character in the story and seems to have little to gain by distorting the narrative reality. He is able to distance himself from Delano's actions, giving the narrator a certain level of omniscience. This does not mean that it is Melville himself who is telling the story as an observer, as Genette would insist (186). It simply means that the narrator is more neutral in relation to the story, than had he been a homodiegetic narrator like the lawyer. Being heterodiegetic and extradiegetic endows the narrator with an air of authority, which again makes the reader more liable to trust his descriptions (Rimmon-Kenan 60). Accordingly, if the narrator is critical of the main character's actions, the reader might come to share his view.

Some critics linger on the fact that Melville uses a so-called third-person narrator, and not a first-person narrator, as in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (Berthoff 116). Most of Melville's narrators in *The Piazza Tales* are first-person narrators. This is of little significance, if any at all. It does not say anything about the narrator or the focaliser, other than that the narrator is an "I" or a "s/he." What matters is whether the narrator or focaliser is external or character-bound (Bal 21). There is no real difference between 'third-person centre of consciousness and first-person retrospective narration,' according to narrative theorist Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (73). 'It specifies only point of view, not narrative voice,' Seymour Chatman adds (154).

It is more interesting to compare the instances and degrees of covert and overt narration. For the most part, the narrator in "Benito Cereno" is covert, the owner of the

narrative voice ‘remains hidden in the discourse shadows’ (Chatman 197). This is a fairly common occurrence; as omniscient narrators seldom reveal as much as the author knows (Booth 160). Instead, the narrator tends to restrict his perception to one of the characters, in this case, Delano. Since Delano’s internal thoughts and instincts are connected to the narrator’s perspective, one may perhaps speak of a ‘limited omniscient’ narrator as Genette defines it (187). Melville allows the reader indirect access to Delano’s mind. He showcases Delano’s racist idealism by allowing him to focalise the events and different characters he encounters aboard the *San Dominick*. Melville shows how Delano’s lack of self-criticism keeps him from seeing the evil in himself and others.

As was seen in “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” there is still a chance that readers will not be able to pick up on the main character’s moral flaws. One may misinterpret elements of tragedy as comedy. To counter the possibility of such misreadings, Melville has included direct, overt narrative commentary. In some instances, the narrator even comments on what the main character did not see or did not think. Focalisation changes so that, momentarily, the narrator is focalising Delano’s behaviour. The two types of focalisation complement one another, but should be analysed separately. They have a contrasting effect on the reader’s understanding (Bal 149). Focalisation through the narrator seems more objective and authoritative. Focalisation from within, through Delano, creates suspense as to what is going to happen next. The disparity between the narrator and Delano entails ironic opposition; ‘communication is between the narrator and the narratee at the expense of a character’ (Chatman 229), making it easier for the reader to pick up on the textual meaning.

The first page of the “Benito Cereno” presents the reader with a number of clues about the remainder of the story. It reveals questions, but postpones answers (Bal 64). It is a type of text that develops ‘in the reader a specific competence needed to come to grips with’ the diegesis (Rimmon-Kenan 118). Melville has altered the year of the slave mutiny, as well as the name of the ships. In the original, the event took place in 1805, not 1799, and the boats were named *Perseverance* and *Tryal*, not *The Bachelor’s Delight* and *San Dominick* (Delano 71). Many critics, such as Dan McCall (34) and Laurie Robertson-Lorant (293), relate these altercations to the slave revolt of Santo Domingo in the 1790s. The island of Santo Domingo was one of the wealthiest colonies of the Americas, but came to a sudden stand-still when Toussaint L’Overture lead the black slaves to revolt. Outnumbering the whites ten to one, they quickly took control of the French colony. The French government eventually abolished

slavery a few years after the incident. Melville seems to be implying that the United States could well experience the same type of violent uprising if they did not change their path.

That morning in 1799 ‘was one peculiar to that coast. Everything was mute and calm; everything gray’ (Melville, “Benito Cereno” 1). The sea was gray like lead, ‘the sky seemed a gray surtout. Flights of troubled gray fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapors...’ (1). In the third paragraph, the narrator does his utmost, in a kind of poetic prose, to ensure that the narratee observes the eerie, uncertain quality of that morning. Gray is in the introductory sentence given end-focus. The colour is repeated throughout the entire paragraph, as well is the word ‘troubled.’ The constant repetition and the use of alliteration and assonance (‘kith and kin’), gives the sentences a lyrical air. And adhering to iambic rhythmic pattern, the final sentence seems almost like a stanzaic conclusion. Indeed, the ‘Shadows present, [are] foreshadowing deeper shadows to come’ (1). There is an artificial, one might say gothic, tendency about the weather.

A set description can be a sign of a covert or an overt narrator, depending on its significance relative to the story (Chatman 219). The introductory paragraphs in “Benito Cereno” are reminiscent of the beginning of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, with a similar emphasis on grayness and uncertainty. As such, the first page is both a part of the story and a comment upon its narrative meaning. Upon the second reading, the reader will most likely see it as a description of Captain Delano’s mindset: he is unable to see that the slaves aboard the *San Dominick* have rioted and taken control of the ship. He is perplexed by how the whites seem subordinate to the blacks, but does not understand why. Add to this the gloomy sense of pressure which pervades the third paragraph, one might see the colour gray as a reference to race. Melville tries to break down the stereotypical dichotomy between white and black. The distinction between the two is unreal, artificially upheld by the white majority. America created its own image by distancing itself from the ‘rawness and savagery’ of the African (Morrison 44). American meant white, and did not need an adjective (Morrison 47). But as the narrator seems to imply, white supremacy is upheld by power, heavy ‘lead that has cooled and set in the smelter’s mould,’ not authority. Slavery is a temporary situation reaffirmed by ignorant bachelors like Delano, who are unable to see the ‘deeper shadows’ approaching (1):

Captain Delano’s surprise might have deepened into some uneasiness had he not been a person of a singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable, except

on extraordinary and repeated incentives, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms, any way involving the imputation of malign in man.[//]
Whether, in view of what humanity is capable of, such a trait implies, along with a benevolent heart, more than ordinary quickness and accuracy of intellectual perception, may be left to the wise to determine. (1-2)

The fourth paragraph contrasts with the previous one in a distinctive way. Whereas the third paragraph can be seen as poetic prose, the fourth is more affirmative, and less sentimental. It seems like Melville went to great pains to find the appropriate way to define Delano's personality, without being too dismissive and judgmental, but at the same time leaving little doubt that he is not to be admired. This type of narrative, according to Genette, 'says less than it knows, but it often makes known more than it says' (198).

The quote may be divided in two. The first is a kind of hypothesis or statement, saying at least something about Delano's behaviour. The second sentence functions as a rhetorical or ironic statement, questioning the validity of the previous declarative. 'The wise' may decide whether his actions are honourable or disreputable. 'The wise' could be an indirect reference to the narratee. The narrator wants the narratee to take a stand and consider whether Delano is 'a person of singularly undistrustful good nature.' Taking a closer look at the quote, one may find hints that Delano's actions and ways of interpreting are far from neutral. As the following discussion will show, he is a man of his time, displaying an imbalanced view. Captain Amasa Delano is described with such bravado, such splendour, that the adjectives lose their credibility. With its numerous positive pre-modifiers and superlatives, the statement is too good to be true. He is a man of 'singularly undistrustful good nature, not liable, except on extraordinary and repeated incentives, and hardly then, to indulge in personal alarms' (1-2). The main clause is divided and intertwined with several subordinated clauses functioning as conditioning adverbials. The whole idea of Delano behaving in a non-ideal manner is reduced to a hypothetical condition. Melville's use of modal auxiliaries to express epistemic modality of possibility makes a polite suggestion that the first half of the paragraph may not be totally accurate. There 'may' be another side to the story. The subordinating conjunction 'whether' combined with 'may be' underlines that Delano is not only a man unaware of his own shortcomings, but that it is up to the reader to decide if he is in the wrong.

As in "Bartleby, the Scrivener," the introduction has a framing effect, or what Rimmon-Kenan calls the 'Primacy-effect' (120). It sets the tone and to a large extent

determines how the remaining part of the story will be interpreted; ‘any successful transfer [of meaning]—though initiated by the text—depends on the extent to which this text can activate the individual reader’s faculties of perceiving and processing’ (Iser 107). The narrator makes it explicitly clear that the narratee ought to be careful and skeptical as to Captain Delano’s benevolence. The colour gray, the sensation of something unknown approaching in the distance, coupled with the narrator’s overt comments about Delano’s rationality, makes it easier for the reader to grasp the textual meaning. Since ‘art exists only through and for other people’ (Sartre qtd. in Iser 108), it is only logical that Melville should try to make Delano’s character flaw perceivable to the reader. Reading is a situation of one-way communication, where the reader cannot check his understanding against that of the author, at least not in any direct way (Iser 166). This means that the text itself should provide adequate basis for interpretation.

In “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” the lawyer is out to protect his renom  while struggling to understand his employees. His desires as an employer and a capitalist clash with his Christian conscience, resulting in an oscillating position. The reader may therefore come both to despise and support the narrator. The lawyer has a materialist motive, which he might not want to share with the narratee, but at the same times he does try to be compassionate towards Bartleby. And since he is a narrator-focaliser, it is difficult to determine whether his narrative represents the entire truth. In other words, Melville made the introductory pages of the lawyer’s narrative duplicitous, because it was functional to the story. The story centres around different aspects of truth and the need to be a critical thinker. It should therefore not be surprising that the narrator challenges the reader’s perceptions of reality.

In “Benito Cereno,” Melville is discussing a trait of American society that he could find no reason to defend. Therefore, the story does not show the same *type* of ambiguity as found in “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” Since the narrator is not a part of the storyline, he has little to gain by distorting the fictional reality. In “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” the lawyer is a character-bound narrator and not to be trusted, which suits the topic of discussion, namely truth and relativity. Slavery, however, was one of the issues that most inflamed Melville as a writer. There is still some level of uncertainty about what the text means, but there is little doubt that Melville wants the reader to seriously consider the narrator’s alternative standpoint. Melville is scrutinizing the cause and effect of oppression from the eyes of someone other

than the oppressor. Melville wants to show how '[w]idespread societal hardship' makes it 'very difficult or impossible to build recognizable democratic political systems' (Haynes 5).

The most prominent feature of "Benito Cereno," with the possible exception of the court deposition, is Delano's inability to detect the slave mutiny. Boarding the ship, he surmises 'that it might be a ship in distress' (2). The slaves pour 'out a common tale of suffering' (4), but something seems amiss. He understands from the context that it is indeed 'a Spanish merchant[ship] of the first class, carrying negroes amongst other valuable freight' (3), but he cannot quite make sense of the ship's decay. 'The ship seems unreal [...] strange costumes, gestures and faces, but a shadowy tableau just emerged from the deep' (4). He approaches the Spaniard, Benito Cereno, to learn what has caused such desperate conditions.

Don Benito Cereno explains that the ship 'sailed from Buenos Ayres bound to Lima,' but met 'heavy gales' 'off Cape Horn' (9). During this storm most of the sailors and officers died, either from falling over board or from 'the scurvy [that] broke out' in its wake (10). Benito's story is a hypodiegetic level below that of the narrator. It presents the reader with two possible explanations for what has happened in the past. And like the reader, Delano finds Benito's telling of the story and the narrative itself suspicious. Every time Benito comes close to explaining how they spent an entire 'hundred and ninety days' on their journey, Benito faints (9). The third time Benito touches upon the reason for his despair, the Spanish sailor explicitly mentions Alexandro Aranda by name. The narrator, to stimulate the narratee's curiosity, directly infers the relationship between Benito's late friend and Benito's loss of consciousness. Delano asks how he died, and Benito answers, 'Died of the fever. Oh could I but—Again quivering, the Spaniard stopped' (15). The reader will at this point know that Benito, for some reason, is withholding information. But 'the mild sun of Captain Delano's good-nature' keeps the protagonist from being too suspicious (19). Delano does not realise that the blacks have killed their master. Instead of prying into the real causes for concern, Delano is more interested in finding superficial explanations.

The blacks' energy and activity contrast Benito's 'plain traces of sleepless cares and disquietudes' (5). Delano notices how 'four elderly grizzled negroes' 'drone and drul[e]' away in a 'continuous, low, monotoneous chant' (5). On the quarter deck, he hears six slaves clashing their hatchets together 'with a barbarous din' (5). This should worry Delano. But he is able to put such thoughts aside by reminding himself that such is only the 'raw aspect of

unsophisticated Africans' (5). The blacks were simply 'stupidly intent on their work, unmindful of everything beside' (13).

Delano's patience is put to the test when he sees one of the slaves hitting one of the white sailors over the head with a knife. Benito mutters that 'it [is] merely the sport of the lad' (13). Delano maintains that had this happened on his own boat, the *Bachelor's Delight*, 'instant punishment would have followed' (14). He wants to pursue this topic further, but 'unwilling to appear uncivil even to incivility itself,' 'make[s] some trivial remark and move[s] off' (21). In a marked contrast to Benito's constant shortness of breath, '[Delano] rouse[s] himself, dilate[s] his chest, fel[els] himself strong on his legs, and coolly consider[s]' that the actions aboard San Dominic can still be defended (21). It is as though Delano is actually unwilling to admit that the slaves have taken control of the ship. '[T]he American's thoughts [are] tranquilizing' (23). '[T]he same conduct, which [...] had raised alarm, served to dispel it' (23). Thus, blind to the real occurrences aboard *San Dominick*, 'Captain Delano, assuming a good-humoured, off-handed air, continu[es] to advance' (italics mine, 25).

It is worth commenting upon Melville's use of the word assume. Both the lawyer and Delano may be said to be men of assumptions. In the lawyer's case, capitalist assumptions are partly responsible for the lawyer's inability to communicate with Bartleby. He constantly relates Bartleby's behavior to his previous experience, instead of reacting to what his instincts tell him. He has a business rationality and is used to a causal administration of his affairs. He 'assume[s] that Bartleby would depart' and 'retrospectively assumed that departed he was' (1109). He builds his world view on the 'application of the doctrine of assumptions' (1109). This is why he is shocked every time Bartleby refuses to comply with his wishes. Bartleby is a man of preferences, not assumptions. They do not share the same ideological background, which prevents them from reaching an understanding.

Delano is also a man of assumptions. He is either unwilling or unable to realize that the slaves are capable of rising against their master. He may come close to an epiphany, but never quite reaches it. At one point, he actually thinks that Don Benito is in some way 'in complicity with the blacks,' that together they are plotting to take over the ship. But he assumes that this is not the case (29). After all, the blacks 'were too stupid' (29). The 'whites, too, by nature, were the shrewder race' (29). He sees the black as a simple, docile, and naturally subservient race. 'Most negroes are natural valets and hair-dressers; taking to the comb and brush congenially as to the castanets, and flourishing them with almost equal

satisfaction' (36). He admires their 'great gift of good-humor [...] a certain easy cheerfulness, harmonious in every glance and gesture' (37). The blacks would not rebel. After all, they have 'the docility arising from the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind' (37). In short, 'Captain Delano took to negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs' (37). Displaying such a prejudiced mindset, it is no wonder that Delano does not see through the tableau vivants of the Spanish ship.

Each time Delano's stereotypical perception of black versus white characteristics is challenged, he resorts to racial slander. He does not want to be self-critical. He may be shocked by Benito's 'singular altercations of courtesy and ill-breeding,' but resolves that it is caused by 'innocent lunacy' (22). This results in what some critics call a tedious repetition of a similar chain of events (Arvin). Delano is frustrated, annoyed or suspicious, which amounts to a series of generalizations, distractions, or inappropriate excuses. He may ask, 'what do all these phantoms amount to' (21), but the truth eludes him. He is more comfortable with considering the familiar and known, such as the 'sunny' and 'quite sociable sight' of his own ship. He always seems to find some excuse not to see the reason for *San Dominick's* 'sad disrepair' (3).

Tocqueville wrote that, 'When once the Americans have taken up an idea, whether it be well or ill founded, nothing is more difficult than to eradicate it from their minds' (230). Most Americans do not learn from experience, but live 'in a perpetual practice of self-applause' (318). If one is to change the habits and ideals of the Americans, 'individuals must feel that current beliefs are no longer working satisfactorily, [people] should be exposed to ambiguities and confusing issues' (Bendixen and Rule qtd. in Moon 143). This is not easily accomplished. Melville may be able to prove that his characters' assumptions are illegitimate, but it is another thing to do the same in real life. And even though people have their misconceptions displayed, as is the case in "Benito Cereno," they may dislike the moral uncertainty that follows so much that they come to deny it. 'A common way of dealing of dealing with the uncertainty in life is to ignore it completely or to invent some "higher rationale" to [defend] it' (Hastie and Davies qtd. in Moon 34). The latter is the case with Yankee captains like Delano.

The lawyer in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" behaves in a similar way. Every time Bartleby acts in a way the lawyer considers contrary to 'common usage and common sense,' he refuses to empathise with Bartleby's ideals. This is part of the reason why the lawyer will never be

able to explain his strange behavior. That would entail self-reflection. The consequence is that, like Delano, he finds excuses for not investigating further and resorts to generalizations. The lawyer would have liked to rid himself of Bartleby. But his guilty conscience prevents him from doing so, 'Had there been anything ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him' (1198-1199). There was something about Bartleby 'that strangely disarmed [him]' (1099). He thinks that Bartleby's eccentricities are no fault of his own, and that if he were to turn Bartleby away, 'he will fall in with some less indulgent employer' (1101). He does not understand Bartleby, or his refusal to work, and therefore has a hard time dismissing his actions. Like the bachelor captain, the lawyer tries to find some rational explanation for the stranger's behavior. Was it due to a lack of light or was it the low wages that led to Bartleby's refusal to work?

Both protagonists base their judgments on dubious ideological viewpoints. When they finally make comments that have some truth to them, they show little actual understanding in what they say. Captain Delano acknowledges that he at times represents one of those 'antic deceits [from] which, perhaps, the best regulated mind is not always free' (38). The lawyer notes that his business is rather boring and might operate destructively on the average mind, but he does not see how it connects with his workers. Despite such similarities, Delano is the one who in the end is perceived as the most delusional. The main reason why the reader may draw such a conclusion has to do with the type of narrator and focaliser in use.

The lawyer is a homodiegetic narrator. He is also the sole focaliser, which means that the reader's perception of the fictional reality is limited to his vision. He may be said to be an unreliable narrator due to personal involvement, limited knowledge and an imbalanced value scheme. Thus, the reader may intuitively be eager to resist his power as a narrator. But, somehow, the lawyer does not seem like a villain. As a narrator-focaliser, Melville makes it easier for the reader to understand his moral confusion. He is first and foremost Bartleby's employer. Capitalist assumptions aside, he has to maintain at least part of the hierarchical structure of his office. Secondly, Bartleby is an enigma. Bartleby refuses to open up, which limits both the narrator's and the reader's understanding. Though the reader may not share the lawyer's ideological background, he cannot refute the narrator's feeling of hopelessness and inadequacy. To the very last page, and even after having finished reading the story, Bartleby's past, except for one little rumour, remains a closed chapter. The secret retains its integrity, and so does the narrator.

In “Benito Cereno,” the use of a heterodiegetic narrator with both external and internal focalization, presents the reader with a more judgmental portrayal of the main actor. The first page sets the tone and gives a direct definition of Delano’s character flaw. Usually, the main character’s introductory appearance is challenged, so that the reader has trouble reaching a conclusion (Rimmon-Kenan 38-39). The lawyer’s narrative follows such a logic, Delano’s does not. In Delano’s case, the reader knows more than the main character. His actions become predictable, which heightens the suspense. The story has the structure of a threat, not a secret. Delano acts mistakenly, moving closer to a catastrophic ending which he does not see coming.

Like an echo of the characterizing description on the first page, the narrator keeps making explicit comments about Delano, referring to him as the ‘blunt-thinking American’ (12). Delano is a man of such ‘native simplicity as to be incapable of satire or irony’ (17). He would rather ‘get rid of the malady,’ ‘by ignoring the symptoms’ than understand the cause of his illness (30). Therefore, his focalization is bound to lead to an untrustworthy representation of the fictional truth. ‘Unperceived by the American, the two blacks eyed the sailor intently’ (45). The narrator leaves no doubt in the narratee’s mind that Delano has a limited vision.

When Benito breaks the silence and jumps ship, informing the American captain about the brutal murder of his friend Don Aranda, Delano finally realizes that there has been a mutiny. The protagonist’s suspicion is confirmed. The reader did not need such a confirmation. He has already seen through Babo’s disguise. Instead, Melville makes the reader wonder what kept Delano from the same realization. What is the cause of Delano’s misconceptions? If the lawyer based his world view on capitalism, on what ideology and theories does Delano base his judgments? In a narrative technique Umberto Eco has described in general, Melville ‘stimulate[s] the private world of the addressee so that he can draw from inside himself some deeper response that mirrors the subtler resonances underlying the text’ (9). Melville undermines the familiar logic of white supremacy. He alters or falsifies the ethic of many contemporary American readers. In order to understand the text, it is the reader who has to change in order to fill in the blanks.

There are two primary causes of Delano’s conduct: idealism and racism. In the remainder of the chapter, my main focus will be on the latter. Racism fuelled white supremacists with a reason and excuse to dominate the blacks. I will first present the historical context and then relate my findings to the text. However, some understanding for the

prevalent idealism of the period is also needed. Idealism might not have been the determining reason why America came to adopt slavery, but it was influential in keeping slavery alive. It was part of the reason why Americans like Delano did not learn from their colonial predecessors, the Spanish.

Melville is in a sense picking apart the slavery apologists' 'chain of reasoning' (Fisher 35). The central activity in critical thinking is the assessment of what might be called evidence, in order to make a judgment (Moon 33). But instead of stating outright what causes Delano's blindness, Melville merely draws an outline. The reader is not spoon-fed the answer, but obliged to strive for it himself. This is commonly seen as the most active and productive way of encouraging self-reflection (McKay and Kember qtd. in Moon 81).

Americans made much of their feeling of 'autonomy, authority, newness and difference,' which was 'made possible, shaped by, activated by a complex awareness and employment of a constituted Africanism.' It provided 'the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity' (Morrison 44). Africanism led to three types, or categories, of racist assumptions: 'proslavery ideology, scientific racism, and romantic notions of innate racial character' (Karcher 19). All these forms of racism are at different times displayed through Delano.

Slavery apologists believed that the blacks were better suited for the physical labour of the Deep South. In contrast to white labourers, they were 'inured to hot climates and immune to such tropical diseases as malaria and yellow fever' (Karcher 20). In "Benito Cereno," this belief can be seen in Delano's acceptance of Benito's cover story. He has relatively little difficulty believing that the slaves survived in larger numbers after the scurvy. The 1840s to the 1850s also saw the rise of ethnology. The theory provided scientific grounds for subduing African slaves, placing the Anglo-Saxon at the top and the blacks at the bottom of the racial hierarchy (Karcher 22). They would study cranial differences and draw false conclusions to back up an already unstable rhetoric.

But what caused Americans like Delano to think that blacks were by nature meant to serve the white man? Thomas Jefferson played an important part in founding and empowering many of the racial stereotypes which were to exist well in to the nineteenth century. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he describes blacks as 'more ardent after their female[s]' (139). Love is more of 'an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation' (139).

They are driven by instinct and not contemplation (139). They were perhaps in memory 'equal to the whites; in reason much inferior' (139). Jefferson even went so far as to say that 'in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous' (139). Accordingly, when they were not working or singing, they would be sleeping (139). In other words; the black man was the opposite of the ideal white man, 'deliberate, sentimental, stable and rational' (Johnson 426). According to such a mythological view, the slaves would upon release return to their motherland and spread the cultivation of American, rational values (Johnson 426-427). In "Benito Cereno," the slaves, when given the opportunity, break free and pillage the ship. The slaves do not conform to their stereotypical descriptions, which is exactly that which Delano fails to realize. Melville makes the story a confrontation of the so-called primitive Africa, civilized Europe, and naïve America.

In a large number of instances, the slaves on board San Dominick are in fact described with derogatory, animal similes. Walking the deck, Delano is 'drawn to a slumbering negress [...] with youthful limbs carelessly disposed' (26). And he thinks: 'There's naked nature, now; pure tenderness and love...' (27). The women were like 'unsophisticated leopardesses; loving as doves' (27). Delano took to 'negroes' like 'other men to Newfoundland dogs' (37). He does not see the imminent threat posed by the female slaves, paradoxically calling them both 'leopardess' and 'doves.' Delano is like a tourist in Africa, perceiving the tribes and animals as simple and docile. Even Babo, who will later be revealed as the mastermind of the coup, is a man 'of small stature [...] like a shepherd's dog' (5). The avid reader will pick up on the ambiguous animal references. The leopardess may be a beautiful animal, yet still a master of camouflage and a proficient hunter. The shepherd's dog is both man's best friend and an alert herding dog, for the white and black sheep alike.

Delano is by no means a keen observer or a vigilant actor. And as the last pages of "Benito Cereno" indicate, he does not have the insight needed to alter his behavior. This is not only due to racism, but also idealism. Idealism plays a major role in the story that it could easily dominate the remaining discussion. Idealism and racism in the 1850s intertwined and interacted in such a way that they strengthened each other. Together they were fundamental in making America an expansionist, colonial power. I will, however, due to the brevity of this chapter, only touch upon some instances and some imagery that indicate Melville's position relative to American idealism.

Idealism grew out of a belief, both Puritan and secular in its nature, that America was to be the moral standard against which other nations could consider their democratic abilities (Stern 433). The most critical writers and philosophers such as Thoreau, Whitman, John Winthrop, despite being idealists, did not see America's present as ahistorical and were well aware of the nation's incongruence. Racist idealists like Delano were less cautious in claiming present greatness and seemed unaware of their own hypocrisy. The Delanos of America saw themselves as 'immune to the nonmillennialistic limitations of all other human beings in other nations' (Stern 434). They remained true to their Idealist nationalism, while at the same time 'at one stroke, depriv[ing] the descendants of the Africans of almost all the privileges of humanity' (Tocqueville 393). American Transcendentalists like Emerson saw the present moral shortcomings as a temporary state, emphasizing 'newness and imminent futurity' (Stern 435). Melville, though initially influenced by the American Transcendentalists, was more concerned with the threats of dystopia, than its utopian counterpart.

Delano in many ways represents exactly what Melville feared. Delano sees himself as a kind of New Adam of the New World, filled with the 'optimistic, nationalistic fervor' following America's success as a new colonial power (Stern 437). Americans thought themselves capable and obligated to change the world as they saw fit. As ridiculed in *White-Jacket*, 'we Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time: we bear the ark of the liberties of the world [...] God has predestinated, the mankind expects, great things from our race, and great things we feel in our souls' (Melville). This 'Era of Good Feeling' drew people to believe that the new world was essentially good, and that they themselves were the philanthropists (Stern 442). To Melville, this American dream of benevolence 'was sure to increase the evil in the world unless it were armed with sharper insight than Delano's' (Putzel 169).

Delano is a bachelor aboard the *Bachelor's Delight*. He is a 'man who would keep his freedom, if necessary he will close his eyes and heart in order to avoid entanglement. [He] shuns real commitments' and is not able to take in the complexities of mankind (Fogle 159). With ease, he entertains the idea that evil does not exist, only the absence or lack of good (Johnson 427-428). He lacks the essential ability to detect malign in man (Fogle 124). Delano seems to believe that he is superordinate to the consequences of history. He remains calm and naive, even when he is face to face with his colonial predecessors. He does not recognise the similarity between the Old World order of Benito and the New World order of his own ship.

The question is whether America's 'benevolent optimism is [no] more than a form of self-satisfaction based on blindness' (Putzel 169).

As the narrator notes in *Billy Budd*, 'as a class, sailors are in character a juvenile race. Even their deviations are marked by juvenility.' 'Every sailor is accustomed to obey orders without debating them' (136). Delano is no exception. He is at all times optimistic and does not see how the decay of his surroundings relates to him. When the narrator describes San Dominic, he fuses the boat with a death-like imagery, a sense of deterioration. Delano also notices the boat's decay, but his idealist identity keeps him from any deeper understanding. For example, 'the ship, when made signally visible [...] appeared like a white-washed monastery after a thunder-storm' (3). It is as though the boat has risen from some abyss, 'Her keel seemed laid, her ribs put together, and she launched, from Ezekiel's Valley of Dry Bones' (3). Delano is the one who actually observes the boat, but the metaphors—the heavy, gloomy symbolism, implies a narrator's slant. Delano's simple-mindedness would prevent him from drawing such analogies. 'The principle relic of faded grandeur was the ample oval of the shield-like stern-piece, intricately carved with the arms of Castile and Leon' (3). 'Uppermost and central of which was a dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked' (3).

The satyr is a poignant example of Melville's ability to make symbols instrumental, both as a symbol in itself, but also as a comment on the story. The satyr is half man, half horse, possibly denoting half rational and half driven by emotions and instincts. As though the imagery was not ambiguous enough, Melville masks both the writhing figure and the satyr. The narrator triggers the reader's curiosity as to who is dominating whom. The fact that the satyr is described as 'dark' has lead some critics to conclude that Babo is the dominant part (Kaplan 134). But like Ahab's gold doubloon, the symbol does not surrender to interpretation. One does not know what Melville means by 'dark'. It could well be a reference to skin colour, but also a comment on moral vice, dark in the sense of viciousness. One may be tempted to think that evil is characteristic of the way Babo manipulates Benito, but could it not also be Delano? When Babo, filled with a desperate need for vengeance, jumps ship and tries to stab Benito, Delano tackles him and throws him to the floor. Delano, of course, is unable to see either one of these interpretations. Like the satyr, he is either wilfully or unconsciously masked. He does not see evil in himself, or anyone else, for that matter.

‘The Yankee Captain [remains] jolly and good-humoured’ (James 294). Entering the cuddy, he sees no reason for alarm, despite the room looking like a torture chamber. He observes that Babo, razor in hand, ‘looks like a murderer,’ but makes little of it (39). ‘Knot in hand, and knot in head’ (29), he will not learn from the day’s experiences. When the canvas covering the boat’s beak is torn away, revealing Don Aranda, the diseased slave master’s disfigured corpse, Delano does not pause to consider its meaning. He wants to capture the run-away slaves. Despite Benito who ‘entreated the American not to give chase,’ Delano decides to follow the leader.

Unlike the lawyer, who is passive to the point of ridicule, Delano takes charge in a much more progressive way. He self-assuredly moves forward. The lawyer would rather quit the office than have to face Bartleby. Delano can in no way be said to show the same reluctance. He wants to seize the blacks, at variance with Benito’s warning. The irony is that Delano’s idealist progression reaffirms the nation’s immoral condition. Emerson writes that ‘[w]hoso would be a man, must be a non-conformist’ (“Self-Reliance” 535). Action is essential to Man Thinking, but it is subordinate to the intellect (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 525). Delano represents ‘the sluggish and perverted mind of the multitude, always slow to open to the incursions of reason’ (“The American Scholar” 522). He does not learn from the tragedy which befell Benito. ‘[E]xperience is [not] converted into thought,’ and he is therefore doomed to repeat it (Emerson, “The American Scholar” 522).

One might be tempted to disregard “Benito Cereno” as merely a fictitious story. Delano seems more like a caricature or a parody than a real person. The same can be said of the lawyer. At times, their perceptions seem so at odds with that of the reader that it comes across as unrealistic. In terms of “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” it is difficult to certify the truthfulness of Melville’s “Story of Wall-Street.” The lawyer remains anonymous, Bartleby is an enigma and there are few specific time references. Delano’s narrative, on the other hand, is based on a true story. Melville has certainly added and subtracted from the original material, but the story remains largely the same. Melville is relatively true to the original, especially concerning the court deposition that follows the first half, forcing the reader to contemplate the real everyday cause and effect of slavery.

I will now comment on the narrative changes made in Melville’s rewriting of Captain Amasa Delano’s *Narrative of Voyages and Travels*. By comparing the two versions, it is easier to see the strategic choices Melville made in terms of topicality and theme. This might

at first seem a reversal of my theoretical approach. In the introduction, I underlined that my analysis will be focused on narrative theory. I would let the text be my basis for research, and not biographical information on the author or secondary sources. But due to the time lapse between the 1850s and the present, some historical background is essential to an understanding of Melville's writing. Since my aim is to come to terms with Melville's contemporary writing situation, how his texts encouraged critical thinking about *his* America, I have to have some understanding of the past. Besides, I have already made "Benito Cereno" my main research through close reading. Looking at the historical narrative is only meant to compliment my subjective understanding of the text, not to replace it.

When comparing the two versions, there is also the question, what is a character? And what are the properties of a text? My claim is that Melville uses Delano as the basis for a fictional story, in order to promote critical thinking about America's democratic inadequacy. He tells a part of the original Delano's story which he did not think was being showcased. He could just as easily have invented a purely fictional character to prove the nation's racist idealism, but he chose not to—the reason being that the contextual, real-life frame is what makes the story so powerful. Commenting on the character's ideals and norms is therefore a theoretical grey area. Where does one draw the line between the historical Delano and the fictional, when their narratives are so similar?

The dilemma seems to occur whenever authors blur the lines between fiction and reality, as when Fyodor Dostoyevsky incorporates Napoleon Bonaparte in *Crime and Punishment* (Rimmon-Kenan 83-82). To what extent is it possible to speak of Delano's psychological depth? Should such a character study be pronounced dead by modern writers? Marvin Mudrick claims that to extricate the character from the fictional reality is a 'sentimental misunderstanding of the nature of literature' (qtd. in Rimmon-Kenan 31). Mudrick's purist argument rings true. It would be awkward to think of a fictional character as a real person, with real mental abilities. Not only would it make the discussion of reliability and implied author impossible, it would further make interpretation a seemingly endless activity. The problem is that historical characters transcend the traditional understanding of narrative devices. Since Delano is based on a historical individual, the reader is more willing to accept the description of the character as realistic (Bal 122). The reader might be encouraged to read the real Delano's narrative in a new light upon perusing Melville's

version. Or, it might have the opposite effect: The reader will be critical to Melville's rewriting, since he has already read the original.

Melville intended to make Delano seem like a naïve fool, unsympathetic to the woes of the slaves. In short, he wanted to make him the spitting image of the self-loving Americans who did not learn from history or experience. He wished to break down the stereotype which held the view that blacks did not want freedom, that they were somehow unintelligent and at ease with the present situation. Benito Cereno, having experienced the dangers of slavery, is 'broken in body and mind' (67). If Americans were to avoid the same kind of mutiny, possibly in much larger scale, they would have to alter their course. They should learn from their Spanish precursors, embodied in Benito's decline.

In the original, Benito is far from eager to change his ways. He does not show any appreciation for Delano's help, and refuses to repay him for his efforts and material (Delano 81). And after the mutiny, he actually stabs one of the slaves with a hidden dirk, displaying anger and vengeance, not reluctance or fear (79-80). Interestingly, Delano tries to 'prevent [the Spanish sailors] from using violence towards these wretched creatures' (80). Delano is more of an admirable character than Benito, and seems more inclined to change than his Spanish companion. In terms of Babo, he was actually killed in the raiding of the Spanish ship (84-85). The uprising was planned and carried out by *two* slaves, Mure and Joaquin. They decide to kill their slave master, but they do not make him the new front piece. They simply throw him in the water. It is clear that Melville has altered the original significantly. In order to create a situation that would make it easier to present an abolitionist argument, he has made Babo more of a mastermind, Benito more of an exhausted slave master, and Delano more of a simpleton.

Still, Melville has remained true to the historical figure of Delano, regarding his racist tendencies and lack of self-criticism. Melville has exaggerated his blindness, dulled his senses, but the real-life Delano was in many ways a racist idealist. '[W]hen I take a retrospective view of my life, I cannot find in my soul, that I ever have done anything to deserve such misery and ingratitude as I have suffered at different periods' (81). He firmly believes that '[a]ll bad consequences may be avoided by one who has a knowledge of his duty, and is disposed faithfully to obey its dictates' (77-78). And to prove his innocence, he includes the following court deposition, in hope and faith that the justices of the court know the truth. This, he thinks, 'ought to be the most correct course, as it should give the reader a

better view of the subject than any other method that could be adopted' (82). Melville would disagree.

The narrator in "Benito Cereno" claims that the court deposition 'will, it is hoped, shed light on the preceding narrative' (55). Those familiar with *Bartleby's* story will see the resemblance between the deposition and that 'one little item of rumour' presented on the last page. However, the narrator in "Benito Cereno" is more eager to declare his scepticism, using modal, hedging expressions. The same kind of implied irony, or uncertainty, follows in the aftermath of the court deposition: 'If the deposition of Benito Cereno has served as the key to fit into the lock of the complications which preceded it, then, as a vault whose door has been flung back, the San Dominick's hull lies open today' (67). There is a marked difference between the degree of certainty sported by the historical Delano and the uncertainty of the fictional story's narrator.

Just as the lawyer's narrative in relation to *Bartleby*, what might be implied here is that neither Benito nor the court's statement will be the truth. They do not take into consideration the voice of the blacks. They reinforce their own white power and authority, trying to neutralise the imminent threat of a rebellion. They decapitate Babo and impale his head, silencing critical thoughts. As Melville marked in *Typee*, 'the fiend-like skill we display in the invention of all manner of death-like engines' is adequate proof of the white man being 'the most ferocious animal on the face of the earth.' The court system is slow to change. It prefers to do its duty, whether it is morally justifiable or not. If a justice of the court moves outside of his comfort zone, challenging his peers, 'he leaves the circle in which [the nation has] agreed to confine his authority, he assumes a more important, and perhaps a more useful, influence than that of the magistrate, but he ceases to be a representative of the judicial power' (Tocqueville 129).

Nonetheless, the court deposition does offer the reader an alternative to Delano's focalization. It functions as a kind of side-narrative, or an 'embedded text.' Much like a 'subordinate clause to a main clause' (Bal 56-57), it gives the reader new tools to deal with Delano's focalization. It shows how blatantly misguided his perceptions were. The female slaves, initially referred to as animals, incapable of inflicting evil, do not conform to the stereotype. 'The negresses, of age, were knowing of the revolt, and testified themselves satisfied at the death of their master,' but they would have preferred that he was 'tortured to death, instead of simply kill[ed]' (65). Their songs, which Delano enjoyed listening to, were

not a gay pastime. 'They sang melancholy songs to the negroes,' to inflame their rebel spirits (65).

Delano is equally misguided in his understanding of Francesco, a slave of mixed ethnic background, who seemed to Delano nothing but 'a king of kind heart' (41). A hybrid of white and black, he has 'features more regular than King George of England' (41). Like 'white' blood mixed into 'black broth,' Francesco's European lineage supposedly made him 'an uncommonly intelligent fellow' (42). The court deposition, on the other hand, exposes Francesco as one of the worst mutineers. Had Babo not interposed, Francesco would have poisoned Delano. Despite his partially white heritage, it was Francesco that took part in the murders, not Babo or his main accomplice, Atufal. Finally, Babo, of course, is revealed as the mastermind behind the revolt. He was the one who had Aranda's body stripped of all its flesh and later used it to frighten the Spaniards, asking them if not 'from its whiteness, [they] should not think it a white's' (60).

In the end, Delano does not change. Benito, however, seems so disparingly beaten and alone that he loses his will to live. The American captain tells him that he is saved and asks, 'what has cast such a shadow upon you,' picking up on the shadows alluded to in the story's introduction. 'The negro,' Benito replies (69). 'The negro' could both be a reference to the black slaves or a reference to the moral blackness of slavery itself. It is as ambiguous as Bartleby's 'I prefer not to,' and makes the reader wonder what caused his decline. Was it the fear of a pending large-scale slave rebellion? Did Benito realize that his time as a slave master was over? It might be a response to Delano's lack of insight. Since the court deposition is placed prior to the final talk, the reader may never know whether it was the injustice of the court system or the events aboard San Dominick that lead to Benito's downfall.

Delano's presumptions and self-confidence, in contrast, stay strong. He does not even show a hint of remorse. To Delano, the gray mist of that morning in 1799 is long gone. 'Yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky: these have turned over new leaves' (69). This event is similar to the lawyer's prison visit, when he notes that it is not such a bad place, there is 'the sky' and some 'grass' (1116). Delano's preconceived ideas of how the world is structured correspond to those of the court. He is the 'generous Captain Amasa Delano' (61, 62, 63). Instead of challenging his world view, they support it. His mistakes are cancelled out, reinstating white supremacy.

The American captain claims to be ‘little Jack of the Beach’ (30), ‘a child of the second childhood’ (31). He does not share the innocence of a newborn, but he definitely displays the same kind of ignorance. At times, the reader may come to think that Delano may be capable of change, of being a critical thinker—as when he says ‘Ah, this slavery breeds ugly passions in man’ (41). Long periods of physical pain ‘seems to cancel every social instinct of kindness’ (7). In all parts of society ‘nothing more relaxes good order than misery’ (6). But the American idealist does not learn from history or the Spanish. He does not see that Benito’s ‘silver-mounted sword, apparent symbol of despotic command, was not indeed, a sword, but the ghost of one. The scabbard, artificially stiffened’ (69). The American believes that had the Spanish colonial ruled more forcibly, ‘misrule would hardly have come to [...] pass’ (6). What Delano fails to realize is that the Spanish and the slaves themselves are not the only ones ‘chained to one dull round of command’ (6).

4 Conclusion

Herman Melville grappled with the contrast between America's lost potential and its real present. His writing can be seen as a struggle to reinforce the country's democratic ideals on an individual and a national level. He refused to accept the status quo and wanted to encourage his readers to be more aware of the nature of and the need for critical thinking. His hope seems to have been that the self-critical reader, the self-reflecting American, would be able and willing to deal with the nation's democratic hypocrisy. But in order to inspire change, there first has to be some understanding of what such a change would entail and why it was necessary.

In "Bartleby, the Scrivener," Melville uses capitalism to create an internal conflict, against which he discusses truth and appearances, the need to be self-critical. Through the lawyer, he shows how society is constantly constructing and re-constructing narratives. Nippers, Ginger Nut, Turkey, the lawyer, and Bartleby, they all have different opinions about how the world works. Truth is in a sense always being focalised, resulting in opposite and complimentary realities. One may claim objectivity, but most likely one's vision will be little more than another performance of subjectivity. What matters is how the individual interacts with norms and ideological viewpoints, whether or not one is capable or willing to be empathetic to the opinion of others. Some narratives, like Bartleby's, are less overt than that of the lawyer. One has to be aware that the voice of reason may not be the most audible one. Some perspectives on reality are more truthful than others. Communication and democratic progress requires two equally active parts, meaning that each individual, as a critical thinker, has to maintain an 'active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge' (Dewey qtd. in Fisher 2), both in terms of the origin and the consequence of one's ideals.

With "Benito Cereno," Melville moves from meta-cognitive skills, to a more contextualised and concrete study of critical thinking. He rewrites the real captain Amasa Delano's narrative, making it a commentary on America's racist idealism. The story does not directly refute slavery, but questions the moral grounds upon which it rests. The reader is forced to consider the consequences and basis of America's colonial expansionism. The narrative is set fifty years back in time and functions as a kind of allegory, or warning. If

Americans do not reflect upon the direction in which they are heading, they are doomed to repeat the mistakes of their historical predecessors. Melville showcases the nation's tendency to mute critical voices and preference for conformity. He does not state exactly what course the nation ought to pursue, but makes it clear that they are heading the wrong way. The future is determined in the present, by the readers.

Melville encouraged Americans to be self-critical. He wanted them to challenge their scruples, '[m]ake them advance and declare themselves' ("Billy Budd" 153). He added that '[p]atriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel' (Melville, "Billy Budd" 169). Melville's reason for encouraging critical thinking is perhaps best seen in connection with the rise of the modern state. The period from 1750s to the 1850s replaced the old hierarchy with democratically elected representatives, which formed a new belief in equality, a government founded on reason and skill, the will of the people (Touraine 77). The danger was that the power of the public would become so influential as to suppress critical voices, and possibly the wishes of its own people, resulting in a kind of 'Tyranny of the Majority' (Touraine 82).

As long as people disagree and make arguments based on their own opinions, 'discussion is carried on: but as soon as its decision is irrevocably pronounced, a submissive silence is observed' (Tocqueville 316). There is but 'one single element of strength and of success, with nothing beyond it' (Tocqueville 317). Tocqueville insisted that '[t]he civilization of our age has refined has refined the arts of despotism' (317). In the United States, in Tocqueville's opinion, there may not have been censorship of the press, but there was no need for one. The critical voice was not spoken or written. No one dared or was inspired to challenge the reigning norms (318). Still, one may wonder, if everyone expects the democratically elected to act according to the interest of the majority, 'who is to judge where those interests lie?' (Touraine 115). The danger is that when 'traditional hierarchies have been destroyed, how can the tyranny of the majority be prevented from founding an irrational social order?' (Touraine 84). The individual has to remain vigilant and active, still questioning authorities and one's own sense of morality.

One might claim that in his passionate struggle to encourage critical thinking, Melville has become more of a pessimist, less a realist. His intentions clash with his method, due to a predominant focus on the negative traits of American culture. 'Perhaps he does not give us a ray of his light for every shade of his dark' (Melville, "Mosses" 219). He is filled with a 'black conceit [which] pervades him, through and through. You may be witched by his

sunlight, [...] but there is the blackness of darkness beyond' (Melville, "Mosses" 219). It seems that in his desire to contemplate 'those occasional flashing-forth of the intuitive Truth' (Melville, "Mosses" 219), he has become a cynic. In "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and "Benito Cereno," the ones who stand up to authorities, perish and die; whereas those who do not change, the men of assumptions, such as the lawyer and Delano, survive. There is no catharsis, no cleansing or redemption—only a depiction of life's bare reality.

This has led some critics to think that 'Never did a man instinctively hate human life, our human life, [...] more than Melville did' (Lawrence qtd. in Widmer 671). The truth of the matter is that Melville wanted to 'supply a viable standard [...] for coming to terms with reality' (Williams 330). Melville disliked Emerson's rationalization over issues of slavery, claiming that he demonstrated a 'self-conceit so intensely intellectual and calm that at first one hesitates to call it by its right name' (qtd. in Karcher 15). Even though Emerson seems to have been in agreement with Melville, he almost always managed to retain a positive, some might say naïve, outlook on life and the future of America. But in a moment of frustration, even Emerson acknowledged that '[his] quarrel with America, of course, was that the geography is sublime, but the men are not' (qtd. in West 72). Melville criticized Emerson for being overly optimistic about the capabilities of man-kind (Baym "Introduction to Ralph Waldo Emerson" 489). In Melville's writing, man is neither good nor evil, but rather the symbiosis of both. His writing encourages action through criticism, not optimism.

'Melville made unusual demands on his readers' (Cardwell 104). His texts are inherently ambiguous, his symbols constantly change meaning, and the narrative voices are rarely unbiased. Melville tells the truth 'covertly, and by snatches' (Melville, "Mosses" 220). He penalizes 'the superficial skimmer of pages' (Melville, "Mosses" 220). Like the tortoises of the Galapagos Islands, as depicted in "The Encantadas," he always adds an elusive darkness to his imagery. Melville tempts the reader to draw the wrong conclusions. He makes reading into an activity of searching for truth: 'the tortoise [may be] dark and melancholy as it is upon the back, [but] still possesses a bright side.' Nature always is 'of such a make' that, 'you should not swear that the tortoise has no dark side,' simply because 'you expose their bright sides' ("The Encantadas").

Still, as shown in the previous chapter, some critics fall for Melville's traps, claiming that Melville is a racist or a supporter of slavery. They are the superficial skimmers of pages. Melville's writing is not for such readers. They are a part of the huddled masses, the men of

assumptions, which Melville detested. They represent ‘the constant friction of illiberal minds [which may] wear out at last the best resolves of the more generous’ (“Bartleby, the Scrivener” 1111). To me, Melville wrote to enlighten and encourage the critical voice. He used ambiguity to inspire action against the corruption of authorities, while at the same time retaining his position as a detached observer. As a writer, he did not want to be a political representative. But he did want to incite political change. He wished for that one strong mind, that one critical spirit to rise up and make the dam wall burst. As Tocqueville points out, ‘The words of a strong-minded man, which penetrates amidst the passions of a listening assembly, [can] have more power than the [voices] of a thousand orators’ (223).

My findings in this thesis are by no means conclusive. I have but touched upon the surface of Melville’s literary world. The two literary works I have studied, however, show a tendency in Melville’s writing. He seems to have wanted to encourage the reader to be self-critical on a personal basis, but also regarding national issues. He uses ambiguity, narrative layers, reliable and unreliable narrators and focalisers, to create a complex web of appearance and reality. He makes the reader play an active part in determining the meaning of his texts. He makes narrative technique reflect topicality and theme. If the reader is to gain any firm understanding of Melville’s intentions as a writer, he has to be willing to change.

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Note

Parts of the third chapter on "Benito Cereno" have been reused from my own term paper "The Shadow of Slavery in Nineteenth-Century American Literature: Interpreting Ambiguity in 'Benito Cereno.'" This paper was first submitted in the course Nineteenth-Century American Literature at the University of Oslo in the spring term of 2012.

